

“WIDEN THE LENS AND SEE”: POETRY, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND THE ACT OF
WITNESS IN MURIEL RUKEYSER’S “THE BOOK OF THE DEAD”

BY

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ABSTRACT

Poet, journalist, activist, and photographer Muriel Rukeyser remains an important figure of twentieth century poetry. Her docupoetic work, “The Book of the Dead,” exposes the personal, emotional sides of the 1930s Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster while artfully combining excerpted language from victims’ personal testimony letters, medical and legal jargon, and Rukeyser’s own poetic voice. The disaster itself is rarely discussed among scholarly sources, but even more scarce is an attention to the ways in which Rukeyser situates the camera and the act of looking in “The Book of the Dead” as integral parts of her poetic expression of the tragedy in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. This article examines Rukeyser’s complex evocation of the camera as an illusionary tool of witness by discussing select poems in light of documentary photography of the 1930s and Rukeyser’s own photography career. In bringing together details in Rukeyser’s poetry and ideas surrounding photography and the act of witness during the Great Depression, the article reveals the ways in which “The Book of the Dead” uses poetic language to expose the injustices of the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel disaster in a way not possible of the camera or the source documents themselves.

INTRODUCTION

In her 1949 book *The Life of Poetry*, Muriel Rukeyser makes a provocative claim about the impact of visual imagery:

Whether a poem is approached through the eyes in a book, or through the ears, the eyes within the eyes, the visual imagination, are reached; and this in itself is a way of reaching the total imagination. This visual summoning may be made often or very seldom, depending on your poet; if the occurrence is well prepared, the impact is unforgettably strong. (82)

Here, Rukeyser's assertion of the impact of both literal and imaginative sight should not be read as an isolated moment of creative musing. That is, Rukeyser's attention to the visual aspects of poetry informed much of her poetic vision throughout the mid and late 20th century and was a driving force behind her varied oeuvre of articles, poems, and photo-narratives. In the years surrounding the publication of *The Life of Poetry*, for example, Rukeyser produced many works that express her interest in the relationship between visual and verbal representation. In 1943, Rukeyser wrote an article for *The New Republic* magazine titled "Words and Images" where she highlights the creative potential that comes with the combination of written word and photography. Rukeyser suggests that pairing the two mediums may be "one of the cleverest means of communication" (Gander, "Rukeyser and Documentary" 34). Later, Rukeyser continued to develop the idea and worked to make the significance of pairing texts and photographs known; in 1951, Rukeyser sent a short poetic piece titled "The Red Bridge" to Ted Patrick, editor of *Holiday* magazine, and wrote that she would like the poem to be "set up as accompanying text for a picture"; in the late 1950s, Rukeyser continued her practice of combining word

and image in her picture book *I Go Out*, which includes an artist's illustrations alongside Rukeyser's prose; and, in 1970, Rukeyser published *Mazes*, a collection of poetry that features photographs by Milton Charles (Gander, "Rukeyser and Documentary 34, 35). In placing images alongside her writing, Rukeyser opens up both the text and image in a way that necessitates a more involved process of meaning making: "the words would not describe the pictures; the pictures would not illustrate the words," she says. "Together they would carry a stamp and tell a story" (Gander, "Rukeyser and Documentary" 35).

Rukeyser's 1938 long poem titled "The Book of the Dead" foregrounds these later ideas of the dynamic relationship between text and image in a way that stands apart from her other works. While "The Book of the Dead" does not include physical photographic images as some of her other projects do, its documentary-style and camera-lens perspective provide readers with language that brings attention to a visual account of the 1930s Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster – a case of social and racial injustice which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of mostly black workers in the small town of Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. The ways in which Rukeyser repeatedly weaves in references to the camera and develops its role as a tool for visual representation necessitates a closer look at this attention to visuality. If "to take a photograph," as Susan Sontag suggests in her 1977 book, *On Photography*, is "to have interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged...to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting," then Rukeyser's camera in "The Book of the Dead" must be doing something quite different (12). Rukeyser's verse suggests not a passive acceptance of the hundreds of lives lost in the industrial disaster but an evocative call to acknowledge and uncover the victims' silenced voices.

While Rukeyser's work has gained considerable amount of scholarly attention especially in light of feminist theory and documentary poetry as well as the topics of labor laws, war, and human rights, there remains room to explore accounts of the visual in "The Book of the Dead." As such, this article examines Rukeyser's attention to visual representation in "The Book of the Dead" with a particular focus on the ways in which the poetic language enacts the perspective of a camera's lens – one that calls attention to and situates both the reader and writer as witnesses to the scene – and simultaneously destabilizes the assumption that such visual "evidence" always constitutes an accurate reflection. In order to bring out this important duality concerning the function of the camera in Rukeyser's poem, though, my analysis must work in at least two different ways. On the one hand, Rukeyser's utilization of the camera's perspective offers an early example of her thinking on the ways in which a poem's "moving images" can evoke one's "visual imagination" – a concept that she considers in *The Life of Poetry* (164). Thus, this connection between visuality and poetic language is one aspect of "The Book of the Dead" that this article explores. On the other hand, the fact that details in the text itself seem to question the validity of the camera as an objective mode of seeing requires an examination of the ways in which Rukeyser positions poetic visuality differently from the visuality of documentary film and photography – genres that informed much of the thinking on visual representation in the 1930s. The docupoetic qualities of the text, too – the language that Rukeyser excerpts from medical, legal, and personal testimony documents – play a role in the ways in which Rukeyser highlights poetry as a medium that has the potential to question the assumed truth of documentary "evidence."¹ As such,

¹ Other examples of documentary poetry, like that of Anne Carson's "Nox" published in 2010, combines the author's written text with materials from various other sources such as images, photographs, letters, or

“The Book of the Dead” takes both poetry and the specifics of the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster as its subjects.

My argument, then, contains three related parts rooted in Rukeyser’s attention to the camera and visual representation; reading select poems in “The Book of the Dead” in the context of Depression era documentary film and photography, the notion of “witness” as it pertains to photography and poetry, and Rukeyser’s later assertion that poetry can “extend the document” reveals the ways in which “The Book of the Dead” uses poetic language to expose the injustices of the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel disaster in a way not possible of the camera or the source documents themselves. At the core of these related threads concerning visual representation is the question of what it means to use poetry to document a tragedy.

excerpted language from outside documents that exist apart from the poet’s verse. Ehlers and Herd suggest that “documentary poetry is largely a 20th century construction” and is one that works “in relation to major technological changes that transformed the landscape of poetic composition and circulation” (“North American Documentary Poetry and Poetics”).

THE CAMERA AND THE ACT OF WITNESS

Rukeyser was initially drawn to the disaster in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia in 1935 when she read a newly released piece about the incident published in the *New Masses* journal. The article detailed the effects of the hydroelectric project initiated by a subsidiary of the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation and marked the beginning of the event's exposure in mainstream media (Moore 9). At the start, the company's goal was to construct a tunnel that would channel water from the New River to a power station in order to produce electrical energy for the nearby town of Alloy. As the rock in the tunnel contained large amounts of silica, a valuable resource for the steel industry, the project switched to a dry excavation of the compound which essentially turned the tunnel into a mine. The process of using dry drilling methods, though cheaper and faster, produced harmful, silicosis-causing dust which is deadly when breathed into the lungs. Without proper masks and enough ventilation, the workers were subjected to the silica dust and the resulting disease, marking the incident as one of the worst industrial disasters in American history (Wolosky 156-57).

Its social and political controversies, paired with the fact that the federal government failed to fully investigate the disaster, inspired Rukeyser to see the aftermath of the tunneling project for herself. In the spring of 1936, Rukeyser and her photographer friend Nancy Naumburg² packed up their camera cases and drove from New York to the mountains of Fayette County, West Virginia with the hopes of creating a collaborative work that would combine Rukeyser's texts with Naumburg's photography (Moore 9).

² Before traveling to Gauley Bridge together and planning the collaborative work of "The Book of the Dead," Rukeyser and Naumburg were both students at Vassar College where they were reporters for the university's newspaper, *The Student Review*, between 1930 and 1932 (Gander, "Rukeyser and Documentary" 9).

The photographs, though, meant to show readers the sights of Gauley Bridge and its inhabitants, never made it into the final version of the text. Only Catherine Moore's introductory essay in the 2018 edition includes three of the images, and the reason behind their omission in "The Book of the Dead" remains "unknown" (Moore 10).³ Despite the lack of physical photographic images in "The Book of the Dead," Rukeyser's poetic language hints at the camera's presence as a tool that can be used to observe a place and its inhabitants. The first part of this article explores the ways in which the camera occupies a significant place in "The Book of the Dead" and points to Rukeyser's attention to the decade's preoccupations with visual representation.

The section of the poem cycle titled "Gauley Bridge," for example, most explicitly positions the camera as the lens from which readers witness the activities of the town: "Camera at the crossing sees the city," writes Rukeyser, drawing attention to the act of witness in a line that sets up the camera literally – "at the crossing" – and figuratively as the tool of observation (68). The poem continues to describe the sights of Gauley Bridge, beckoning readers to visualize the "street of wooden walls and empty windows" and "the deserted Negro standing in the corner" (68). Other lines throughout the poem remind readers of the camera, sometimes repeating the word as the speaker draws attention to various members of the community: "the eyes of the Negro, looking down the track, / hotel man and hotel, cafeteria, camera" (69). Such lines offer quick snapshots that capture the everyday lives of the people in the town and link the act of

³ Catherine Moore's introduction includes images of the Hawk's Nest Dam, the "shacks and railroad tracks" of the town of Vanetta – a small town about three minutes from Gauley Bridge – and the kitchen of George Robinson, a migrant driller who was the "leader and voice" of the committee in Rukeyser's section titled "Praise of the Committee" (Moore, 5, 22, 25).

sight, the “Negro” man’s “looking,” to the presence of the camera which Rukeyser situates as a visible part of the scene.

“The Road” contains a similar attention to the sights of Gauley Bridge and emphasizes the camera’s role in situating the reader as witness to the roadsides of West Virginia. Throughout this section, Rukeyser presents small moments, brief flashes of the landmarks that shift from one image to the next:

the Midland Trail leaves the Virginia furnace
iron Clifton Forge, Covington iron, goes down
into the wealthy valley, resorts, the chalk hotel. (62)

Such snap-shots of different places in West Virginia continue throughout “The Road” as Rukeyser illustrates the “Pillars and fairway; spa; White Sulphur Springs. Airport,” and the “simple mountains, sheer, dark-graded with pine” (62). In describing the landscape as a scene that unfolds with each new geographical milestone, Rukeyser beckons readers to visualize the land as the speaker describes it in motion – a motion that can both allude to the ways in which the language positions the reader as witness as they, along with the speaker, view the landscape from the window of a moving car, as well as the movement of a motion picture: a collection of moving images captured through the lens of the camera. Indeed, one of the final stanzas in “The Road,” like “Gauley Bridge,” includes the camera as a tool for seeing the surrounding scene: “Now the photographer unpacks camera and case / surveying the deep country /following discovery” (62). As this moment offers a pause from the scenic unfolding that characterizes the first half of “The Road,” it emphasizes the presence of the camera as a tool to “survey,” to closely observe and discover one’s surroundings. As Justin Parks notes, the camera, like its presence in

“Gauley Bridge,” is a visible part of the landscape and the poem itself in a way that “draws attention to levels of mediation inhering in both photography and writing” (166).⁴

In many ways, these initial references to the camera as a tool that situates the writer and reader as witnesses to the scenes of Gauley Bridge relate to Rukeyser’s own film and photography career. In 1937, Rukeyser was on the board of advisors for Frontier Films – an association of filmmakers of which Paul Strand⁵ was the president (Gander “Rukeyser and Documentary” 9). In this role, Rukeyser collaborated with filmmakers to write, cut, and edit materials for various documentary film projects – many of which contained social and political underpinnings as they displayed individuals’ experiences across the US. Catherine Gander notes that this exposure to film as a medium that relies on the filmmaker’s ability to edit and piece together camera-produced clips, plays a role in Rukeyser’s consideration of moving images in her poetry (Gander “Rukeyser and Documentary” 8). The sense of movement present in the quickly shifting images of “The Road,” for example, perhaps demonstrates Rukeyser’s experimentation with the qualities of film in her poetry.

Rukeyser’s position with Frontier Films also allowed her to have “personal and professional” relationships with prominent photographers who, in the 1930s, were known to be especially attentive to the ways in which photographic images allowed viewers to

⁴ In his article, “Muriel Rukeyser’s Poetics of Extension and the Politics of Documentary Photography” Parks notes that this visibility of the camera is “unlike other documentary records contemporary with it in which the figure of the photographer and her camera are rendered invisible through the finished photograph’s naturalization of their perspective” (166).

⁵ Paul Strand was a photographer and filmmaker throughout the 1920s and 1930s. According to Catherine Gander, Strand’s contribution to documentary film “represents a key moment in the construction of an American Documentary method” (Gander, “Rukeyser and Documentary” 7). In his 1917 essay titled “Photography,” Strand argues that his method of “straight photography...bridges the cultural gap between art and science,” and the camera “represented a method of both factual documentation and creative expression” (Gander, “Rukeyser and Documentary” 7).

“witness” the hardships of the Great Depression (Gander, “Rukeyser and Documentary” 19, Stott). At this time, the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a governmentally-initiated group of photographers led by economic professor Roy Stryker between 1935 and 1944, worked to produce a collection of photographs of migrant farm workers in the Midwest (Library of Congress, Gander “Rukeyser and Documentary” 11). Images like Dorothea Lange’s oft-cited “Migrant Mother,” which depicts the worn face of a woman alongside her children in dirty clothes, have come to represent the sentiment of the time; such photographs, often published alongside supplementary captions in the popular genre of the photo-narrative, were regarded as visual evidence of the draught, economic depression, and the resulting emotional turmoil that plagued America. As Rukeyser was a photographer herself and used photographs provided by the FSA in her own photo-narratives, Rukeyser was certainly aware of the notions of witness that underscored the photography of the decade (Gander, “Rukeyser and Documentary” 13).

Importantly, the assumed evidentiary nature of a photograph, which pervaded the years surrounding the publication of “The Book of the Dead,” stemmed from the belief in the camera as a symbolic, truth-telling tool – one that could “mechanically re-create reality” – and place viewers at the scene in the photograph (Stott 31). As such, the lens of the camera and the eye of the viewer were essentially “interchangeable”; the audience was not just an audience but a firsthand witness (Stott 29). In his foundational book “Documentary Expression and Thirties America,” William Stott brings attention to this connection between the camera and the viewer as witness, noting prominent photographers who shared a similar view: James Agee observed that the camera could “make the viewer almost an eyewitness,” and, as Arthur Rothstein once said, “The lens of

the camera is, in effect, the eye of the person looking at the print” (Stott 29). In other words, to view a photograph of personal and economic hardship in the 1930s was essentially to witness the event itself.

For Rukeyser, the term “witness” describes more than just the audience’s immediate connection to the subjects of a photograph. As it applies to her poetry, the word “witness” – as opposed to “the other words like ‘audience,’ ‘listener,’ or ‘reader’” – more appropriately describes the reader’s dynamic relationship to a poem (Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* 187). That is, in *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser suggests that the “overtone of responsibility” present in the term “witness” and not the others makes the reader more of an active participant in the poem’s construction of meaning. In reading, the reader/witness demonstrates “the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience” (187). Attending to the poetic language in “The Book of the Dead” reveals the ways in which Rukeyser beckons the reader to be a “witness,” to feel a sense of responsibility for the disaster at Gauley Bridge beyond just the detailed landscape descriptions that place readers in the scenes of West Virginia.

In addition to the scenic imagery, the reader’s position as witness in “The Road,” for example, has much to do with the poem’s second-person address, the “you” that importantly opens the very first section of the “The Book of the Dead.” The intentionality of this point of view is clear from the first line: “These are roads to take when you think of your country,” writes Rukeyser in a refrain that repeats with a slight change later in the poem: “These roads will take you into your own country” (61, 62).⁶ Though the second

⁶ In his book, “Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*,” Tim Dayton notes that the refrain “first appears in an objectively-oriented form” and then “reappears in a more subjectively oriented form” later in the poem. With this observation, Dayton suggests that the land is “simultaneously physical, one through which

iteration of the line contains a structure that deemphasizes “you” in favor of the road as the source of the journey’s action, the presence of the second-person address still invites readers to imagine themselves in the scene. The second stanza, too, mentions “you” in a way that brings attention to the reader as a participant: “Or when you sit at the wheel and your small light / chooses gas gauge and clock” (61). As William Stott notes, “thirties documentary constantly addresses ‘you.’ The ‘you’ who is we the audience, and exhorts, wheedles, begs us to identify, pity, participate”⁷ (211). Indeed, the last few lines of “The Road” continue to offer the reader an invitation to participate, to be present at the scene, while also offering the reader a sense of ownership over the road as well: “Here is your road, tying / you to its meanings: gorge, boulder, precipice” (63).

As much as this line, along with the repeated references to the camera, suggests a link between Rukeyser’s poetry and the preoccupations concerning reader (or viewer) as witness that characterized the 1930s’ beliefs surrounding documentary photography, we must also acknowledge that Rukeyser does more here than just mirror the thirties’ rhetoric of second person address. With this line that offers readers ownership over the road – an especially personal kind of participation – Rukeyser suggests that one’s perception of the scene must be more personal than what the camera’s assumed objectivity provides. As such, the line importantly begins to call into question the camera as a mode of visual representation. As Tim Dayton notes in his book, “Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*,” a reader’s personal connection to the road’s “meanings” is an

we move...and mental, as the journey forces us to place ourselves in relation to that which will be revealed” (33).

⁷ Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s documentary book titled “You Have Seen Their Faces” similarly dramatizes the reader as an active participant in the author’s arrangement of images – not unlike Rukeyser’s invocation of the “you” in her verse.

important part in understanding the book as a whole – an understanding that requires subjectivity, not an objective camera lens:

The Book of the Dead is to be an exploration of “meanings,” a journey that will throw the traveler into an encounter with a reality often apparently barren and sometimes worse. But only through this journey, and the interaction of subject and object it entails, is meaning to be discovered. (34)

Such a personal interaction of “subject and object,” like what Rukeyser seems to encourage with “Here is your road, tying / you to its meanings” cannot be accomplished through the camera’s limited view. As Susan Sontag suggests, the camera cultivates a single moment in time and limits one’s discovery of the multiple other realities hidden by the photograph.

In the introduction of her book *On Photography*, Sontag notes that, while the act of “using a camera is still a form of participation,” it is a participation that “turns people into objects” and ultimately “imposes standards on [the photograph’s] subjects” (12, 14, 6). In “preferring one exposure to another” and “deciding how a picture should look,” a photographer does not provide viewers with opportunities to explore the other realities of the world in front of the lens (6). Instead, the camera limits the greater context that exists behind every photograph to a singular image cultivated by the photographer’s biased vision. Here, Sontag more explicitly explains the ways in which the camera limits, rather than generates, understanding:

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not*

accepting the world as it looks. ...the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses. (23)

In blindly accepting the camera's rendering of the world, one closes themselves off from a deeper understanding – from the “exploration of meanings” that Tim Dayton notes is essential to a reader's journey through “The Book of the Dead.” Such “meanings,” discovered through the reader's active participation in the journey as it unfolds in Rukeyser's poetry, then, do not seem to be the same “meanings” gained through the camera's objective lens. As I will explore in the next two sections, Rukeyser demonstrates these shortcomings of the camera throughout “The Book of the Dead” while positioning poetry as the form of narration that can expose the personal, emotional sides of the disaster. Poetry, as a form of narration that does not accept the world as it looks but questions and examines the details through an exploration of the nuances of language, has the ability to expose what a camera inherently “hides.”⁸ As Sontag suggests, “Only that which narrates can make us understand” (23).

⁸ Roland Barthes' short book, “Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography” (1981) similarly discusses the “essence” of photography as a mode of representation that can only *resemble* the truth of the photographic subject and therefore provides an imprecise approximation. “The photograph becomes a bizarre *medium*,” Barthes writes, “...false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: ...a mad image, chafed by reality” (Barthes 115).

POETRY OF WITNESS

Sontag's suggestion of "narration" – though useful in exploring the ways in which writing can accomplish a kind of connection to a reader in ways that extend beyond that of the photograph – has interesting implications when considering the claim in light of Rukeyser's particular kind of story-telling in "The Book of the Dead." That is, we must question the narrative quality of "The Book of the Dead," itself, before assuming that the book's fragmented, dynamic, and complex sections provide the same kind of narration that Sontag suggests in "On Photography."

Indeed, Rukeyser's poetry in "The Book of the Dead" does not provide readers with a linear narration of the tragedy at Gauley Bridge in a way that elucidates a clear story line or allows readers to come away from the work with a cohesive understanding of the timeline of the deaths, the court hearings, or the event as a whole. In fact, moments throughout the text defy narration as they provide imagistic glimpses, specks of documented language that exist on the same lines as Rukeyser's verse. The result of this blend of document and verse is a collection of fragments – moments of documented language and poetry that leave us grasping for a more zoomed out view of the event, a kind of retrospective understanding that stands opposite of Rukeyser's work which places readers as direct witnesses to the unfolding tragedy.

Considering Sontag's attention to narration, though, is useful if we understand this evocation of "narration" as the use of voice, the use of language to express a given reality or emotion. As such, Sontag's way of situating language opposite to visual representation via the photograph, sheds light on the ways in which poetry functions in "The Book of the Dead." Specifically, Sontag's praise of art forms that use language to

narrate a particular lived experience, and therefore generate opportunities for understanding, foreshadow Carolyn Forché's 1993 notion of "poetry of witness" – poems whose language is shaped by experiences of "extremity" (30).⁹ Bringing Sontag, Forché and Rukeyser in conversation with one another concerning their ideas of language and evidence reveals the ways in which "The Book of the Dead" highlights poetry as the necessary medium to express the destruction that occurred in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia.

In the introduction to Forché's book, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, Forché coins the term "poetry of witness" to denote texts that "regardless of 'subject matter,' ...bear the trace of extremity within them, and [the poems] are, as such, evidence of what occurred" (30). In its expression of personally-experienced extremity, "poetry of witness," according to Forché, cannot be understood or judged in terms of perceived objectivity – objectivity that the camera in the 1930s, for example, and the legal documentation from the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation court case, was thought to provide. Forché says:

A poem that calls on us from the other side of a situation of extremity cannot be judged

by simplistic notions of 'accuracy' or 'truth.' ...It will have to be judged ... by its consequences, not by our ability to verify its truth. In fact, the poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as the sole trace of an

⁹ Scholar Liati Mayk-Hai in their article "Towards a poetics of I/Eye-witness: Documentary expression and Jewish American Poetry of the 1930s" notes an "emerging sense of poetic witness in Muriel Rukeyser's early poetry and documentary writing" (11). Mayk-Hai's conception of the witness, though, as a figure that "offers the poets a means to cross physical and metaphysical boundaries of space, time, class, species, and color" is more of a literal figure than what Forché suggests here (11).

occurrence. As such there will be nothing for us to base the poem on, no independent account that will tell us whether or not we can see a given text as being 'objectively' true. Poem as trace, poem as evidence. (31)

In releasing such poetry from the burden of being judged based on overly simple notions of "truth" or "objectivity," Forché suggests that poetry of witness is left to be judged by its consequences, by its ability to have an effect on its readers. The readers' response, though, relies on the poet's language that contains traces of the experience. For the poem to contain such a trace, the poet must dive into the complexities of language, to present the particular experience through words that hold an emotional fervor rather than an overt summary of the "facts" of the event itself. Importantly, Forché notes that poems of witness are also "as much 'about' language as are poems that have no subject other than language itself" (30). Considering "The Book of the Dead" as a poem "about language" opens up the text to be a meditation on the ways in which modes of representation that rely on notions of "accuracy" and "truth" to provide evidence – like the camera or, similarly, courtroom and medical jargon – are not responsible methods of honoring and understanding the individual lives affected by the disaster. Poetic language, though, is evidence of a different kind. The following section explores the subtleties of language that allow Rukeyser to turn the metaphor of the camera on its head. In doing so, Rukeyser highlights the lived experiences of the tunnel workers as well as the medium of poetry.

THE CAMERA'S INVERTED LENS

Returning to Rukeyser's treatment of the camera in "The Road" and "Gauley Bridge" reveals Rukeyser's critique of such mechanical modes of seeing while highlighting poetry's ability to bring out perspectives hidden by an assumption of objectivity – particularly that of the camera's lens. Examining the ways in which Rukeyser positions the camera not so much as an objective tool of reflection but an "inverted" lens, a source of "blurring" and obscurity in these poems, opens up the poetry of "The Book of the Dead" as the necessary document that, unlike the photograph, allows for extended meanings, allows readers to encounter the gorges, the boulders, and the precipices of the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster in a way that would not be possible when viewed solely from the camera's claim of truth.

In an evocative line in "The Road," for example, Rukeyser challenges the notion that the camera can provide an accurate reflection of the disaster at Gauley Bridge. Consider these lines for the way in which they turn the camera's reflection on its head:

Now the photographer unpacks camera and case,
surveying the deep country, follows discovery
viewing on groundglass an inverted image. (62)

With the speaker's strong assertion of the "inverted image," here, the poem switches from a scenic representation of the West Virginia roads to a critique of the camera as a mode of visual representation. Walter Kalaidjian's notion of the "ideological powers of scenic representation" at work in Rukeyser's poem speaks to the significance of these lines:

Rukeyser's critique of America's emergent visual culture employs the metaphor of the photographic eye in *The Book of the Dead* to explore the ideological

powers of scenic representation that, however naturalized and effaced in the popular imagery, nevertheless constitutes (rather than reflects) the dominant world outlook in the social field. This spectacle of ideological representation, focused as it is in Rukeyser's poem through the photojournalists' inverted camera lens, literally turns the world on its head. (72)

The camera in "The Road," then, is one that does not reflect but constructs a certain appearance of the landscape and, by extension, the incident at the Hawks Nest Tunnel to an outside audience.

Such an inverted view, though, is not only illusionary in its presentation of a constructed reality, but it is dangerous as well; in this moment, Rukeyser draws a comparison between the deadly glass-like silica dust and the glass of the camera's lens. "Ground-glass opacity," is a medical term that refers to "an area of increased attenuation of the lung on a CT" characterized by a hazy mass that can indicate a range of issues including infection and alveolar disease (Amini). In relating the "groundglass" to the "inverted image" in the same line, the camera itself becomes dangerous, a tool that has the ability to, at best, overlook and, at worst, actively hide the darker details of the town.

"Gauley Bridge" similarly points to poetry's capacity to highlight the camera's "inverted" lens. In the middle of the poem Rukeyser writes, "The man on the street and the camera eye / he leaves the doctor's office, slammed door, doom / any town looks like this one-street town" (69). In this moment, the speaker suggests that, from an outsider looking in, all of these individuals – the "little boy" who "runs with his dog," the waitress in the "yellow apron," and even the "tall coughing man" stamping an envelope – are mundane parts of the city. Yet, as "The Book of the Dead" makes clear, Gauley Bridge

was the site of the tunnel disaster and the place of death for hundreds of people – a fact that Rukeyser alludes to with the sonic hardness of “slammed door, doom” (69). At this point in the poem, Rukeyser suggests that the camera is the mechanism through which a place of disaster – Gauley Bridge – can appear just as normal as “any town.” Such an illusionary view is harmful as it hides the real lived experiences of the victims and their families.

More specifically, in “Gauley Bridge,” the camera’s “blurred” image challenges the camera as a truth-telling mode of witness and calls out the surface level assumption that this town is like any other. The word “crossing” in the first line, for example, evokes the image of a crossroads, an image that appears in both visual art and literature as a symbol that hints at uncertainty or a crucial point of decision (68). In this moment, the word “crossing” signals that the descriptions to follow may not be a straight-forward, accurate depiction of the city. Similarly, in a few lines down, the speaker says that the “little boy” who “runs with his dog,” “blurs the camera-glass fixed on the street” (68). Although the camera remains still and is positioned in a particular place as to capture the events of the city, the blurring of the camera’s glass builds on the uncertain tone of the word “crossing” in the first line. With the blurred lens, the witness – or reader – is distanced from the immediacy of the scene in a way that prevents them from getting an accurate view. While the evocation of the camera suggests that the scene depicts an untouched reality, this language of blurring and crossing undermines the camera’s “truth.”

The poem’s final stanza offers a striking statement that, beyond the blurring and crossing, further brings readers out of the illusion of “Gauley Bridge –” the illusion that the coughing man is the same as any other man in a “one-street town.” Rukeyser writes

“What do you want – a cliff over a city? / A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses? / These people live here” (70). In a sudden shift from scenic representation to a confrontational, rhetorical question, the poem chastises readers who may be convinced by the assumed normalcy of the town.¹⁰

Here, again, Kalaidjian’s notion of the “ideological powers of scenic representation” tracks with Rukeyser’s language in this moment that reveals the opposing sides of the event at the same time – the ideological representation of the city as “any other one-street town” and the underlying racial injustices signified by the final stanza’s declaration that this is not just a scenic place in West Virginia or the object of one’s unquestioning gaze. By occupying a space that both alludes to the ordinariness of the town as documented by the camera and suggests the reality of the deaths of the disaster (“These people live here”), the poem takes up a mode of story-telling that is more significant than the visual components of an image itself. As such, the language of the poem extends the bounds of what a photograph of the town of Gauley Bridge would do; it exposes that that this was a place of injustice.

¹⁰ In *On Photography*, Sontag supports this idea of the camera’s ability to disguise anything in a photograph as beautiful: “An ugly or grotesque subject may be moving because it has been dignified by the attention of the photographer” (15).

RUKEYSER'S PHOTO-NARRATIVE AND "MEARL BLANKENSHIP"

The previously mentioned moments in "Gauley Bridge" and "The Road" call attention to the duality of Rukeyser's language, an "inherent doubleness" that Rukeyser herself mentions is prevalent in her work (Gander, "Facing the fact"). Importantly, this "inherent doubleness," characterized in "The Book of the Dead" by Rukeyser's method of presenting an image on the surface while simultaneously critiquing that image's claim of truth is not limited to Rukeyser's writing on the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster. Her photo narrative "Worlds Alongside," importantly combines photographs and written language in a way that similarly brings attention to readers' reliance on visual cues and calls out the temptation to make superficial judgments based on information gleaned from photographs.

One of the sixteen double-page spreads in "Worlds Alongside," for example, is notable for the way in which Rukeyser uses photographs and texts to encourage not a reductive comparison of two different realities but an uncomfortable confrontation between the casual reader and Rukeyser's message of social difference. On this page, the left side of the spread features a photograph of an African woman's face turned so that viewers can see her ornamented earrings, white against her dark skin. On the right is the profile of an American dancer¹¹ with a "finished face" of makeup and long hair, cut off by the edge of the page. Though the women face one another, their eyes miss each other's gaze. Importantly, the caption that Rukeyser pairs with the images complicates the

¹¹ In Catherine Gander's article "Facing the fact: Word and Image in Muriel Rukeyser's 'Worlds Alongside,'" Gander notes that the American Dancer is later referred to as "Margaret Graham" throughout the photo narrative and adds to the woman's autonomy.

“image-text dialectic” (Gander, “Facing the fact” 294). Here is the caption as it appears in the *Coronet* publication:

*These worlds alongside bring together faces:
the primitive waiting face that is ready to
receive history upon itself, a dark genesis for
us all. It lies beautiful and receptive, a living
rock...*

*and the finished face of the dancer turning
to her audience. (Gander 294)*

Rukeyser’s text generalizes the two women in the photographs by marking the African woman as the “primitive waiting face” and the American dancer as one awarded agency with her ability to present her “finished face” to an audience. The obvious issues in categorizing the women as such point to more than just racial difference; the text foregrounds and challenges readers’ judgments of the differences between the pair of photographs in order to suggest the “ideological risks involved in making what at first glance appear to be rather strange or superficial connections” (Gander 293). As “Worlds Alongside” consists of many depictions such as this one, the book “consistently raises and challenges issues of agency and appropriation, categorization, and ambiguity” (Gander 293). Such a challenge of simplified social types – social types which documentary books at the time so readily employed – marks Rukeyser’s form of the photo narrative as one unique in its ability to offer a new mode of witnessing dependent not on what the photographs present, but on readers’ own feelings of discomfort when faced with the clearly harmful simplification of the images via the accompanying text. Such ethical concerns regarding the literal placement of images and the metaphorical placement of individuals in opposition to each other based on race or class can be seen in the section of “The Book of the Dead” titled “Mearl Blankenship.”

In this section, Rukeyser abandons such explicit references to the camera but retains an attentiveness to the illusions of visual representation and the power of poetry to honor Blankenship's personal testimony. Before including Blankenship's letter, which he wishes to be "sent to the city," Rukeyser introduces Blankenship's experience as a driller in the mine with a reference to documentary photography's attention to the "face" as an important metaphor for diametric opposition in the 1930s – the confrontation of two different perspectives. In the first stanza, for example, the word "face" is used as a verb to position Mearl against the power plant's fire that damaged his lungs:

He stood against the stove
facing the fire –
Little warmth, no words,
loud machines. (76)

Similarly, toward the end of the poem, the word "face" appears three times. Mearl stood against the rock "facing the river / grey river grey face," "his face against the stone" (78). As these words connect, thematically, to Rukeyser's later work in "Worlds Alongside" where Rukeyser "challenges the thirties' documentary rhetoric of social signification," they create space in the poem to perform a similar kind of critique of superficial modes of visual representation (Gander 291). Here, while the words "face" and "against" enforce the position of Mearl as an employee whose testimony works against the media's unjust portrayal of the disaster, there is also the sense that Rukeyser is challenging such judgements of opposition if based on superficial modes of visual representation. With the title as Mearl's first and last name paired with Mearl's personal letter that is spread throughout the poem, Rukeyser highlights Mearl's individuality as a human instead of just another name on a long list of employees. In an act of critique, the poem similarly

demonstrates Rukeyser's work on the "ideological risks" in making "superficial connections" present in "Worlds Alongside."

The docupoetic testimony remains an important part of the poem's ability to highlight Blankenship's personal voice as well as the voices of the other men who Rukeyser honors in "George Robinson: Blues," "Juanita Tinsley," and "Arthur Peyton." Their voices, paired with Rukeyser's poetry, forces readers to acknowledge the men's suffering in a way not possible of a legal document that merely marks an individual as another number on the death poll or a photographic document that trades the depths of spoken language for an image. Returning to "Poetry of Witness," Forché notes that in giving testimony, a poem of witness "becomes an apostrophe to a fellow marcher, and so it is not only a record of experience but an exhortation and a plea against despair. It is not a cry for sympathy but a call for strength" (32).

The final section in "The Book of the Dead," named after the book's title, importantly makes clear that, as Forché mentions, this story of testimony is not a "cry for sympathy;" Rukeyser's final section contains language of strength, of "discovery," "glory," "strikers," "soldiers," and men who "fight against madness" (118, 122). Amid this rush of imagery of war, Rukeyser calls out the photograph more explicitly, positioning the histories of America's lesser-known tragedies as tainted by a metaphorical photograph; Rukeyser suggests that we are on a "ridge of discovery," "until we walk to windows, seeing America / lie in a photograph of power..." (118). The image alone limits the discovery of multiple meanings, Rukeyser seems to say, as "The Book of the Dead" beckons readers to "widen the lens and see" – to use poetry to "extend the document" as Rukeyser writes in "The Life of Poetry" (122).

CONCLUSION

As “The Book of the Dead” uses poetry and excerpted language to document a multifaceted account of the of the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster, the work holds a prominent place in the tradition of documentary poetry. In fact, Rukeyser’s work exists as an early example of the kind of documentary poetry that emerged in the 20th century alongside what scholars call the “advancements in documentary film and the heightened cultural relevance of documentary photography” (Ehlers and Herd). Though poetry-as-document can be traced as far back to the works of Ovid or Virgil, later, more modern works that are memorable for the ways in which they piece together language or imagery from a variety of mixed sources like Anne Carson’s “Nox,” and Tyehimba Jess’ “Olio” can be seen as later versions of Rukeyser’s work in “The Book of the Dead.” The ways in which Rukeyser weaves quotes from doctors and victims, legal documents, and testimonial letters with her own poetic voice creates a work of poetry that does not just act as evidentiary “proof” of the weight of the deaths in Fayette County, West Virginia but explores the “story-telling” potential of poetry as it extends beyond its usual form.

In the final poem of “The Book of the Dead,” Rukeyser writes a line that speaks to this “extending” power of poetry:

Carry abroad the urgent need, the scene,
to photograph and to extend the voice,
to speak this meaning.

Voices speak to us directly. As we move.
As we enrich, growing in larger motion,
this world, this power. (123)¹²

¹² In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser writes a line that expresses a similar sense of personal movement, enrichment, and growth: “These three terms of relationship – poet, poem, and witness – are none of them static. We are changing, living beings, experiencing the inner change of poetry” (187).

“To speak this meaning” is not just the act of photographing; it is to speak it, to write it, to use one’s voice to narrate “directly.” My goal of examining “The Book of the Dead” in relation to documentary photography and the rhetoric surrounding depression era visual representation ultimately stems from this notion that poetry has an extending power – a way of breaking apart the sometimes closely locked gears of the “document,” whether visual or textual, and releasing its fragments into a space that allows for new voices and new “truths.” In the context of the racial and social injustices of the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster, this kind of extension is especially important. Rukeyser’s book of poetry attends to the injustices while doing something equally significant with genre as the duality of her language (both presenting an image and challenging its presentation at the same time) pushes against our preconceived notions of documentary truth, photographic truth, personal truth, and poetry.

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