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EMANCIPATION THROUGH MODERN POETICS

History, Politics, and Aesthetics in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*

By Adriana Marie Temprano

The *Book of the Dead* by Muriel Rukeyser represents a collection of poetry riddled with a history of “relative neglect and obscurity.”¹ For this reason, discourses surrounding the docupoetic collection often grapple with the ambition required when approaching a complex work addressing temporal tragedy. To contribute to this discourse, the literary research in this paper traverses an intersection with three primary angles: the political, the aesthetic, and the emancipatory. The analysis centers on *The Book of the Dead* and the modernist poetry that the author of the collection utilizes when portraying a uniquely chilling perspective of one of the most catastrophic industrial disasters in United States history. Understanding the poetry from Rukeyser, however, faces several obstacles given the rejection of literary convention within each stanza. This paper therefore provides necessary historical, sociological, and aesthetic background to contextualize the important discussions on literature and culture that are underscored within *The Book of the Dead*. Ultimately, the research contends that Rukeyser’s work not only calls for emancipation for the dead, but also the freeing of readers from literary convention in order to confront a tragedy much of society would rather leave behind in history.

I. Introduction

Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* does not simply comply with literary tradition. Instead, Rukeyser’s poems experiment “with prescribed genres and conventions in ways that call into question the structures and assumptions of documentary rhetoric.”² These “prescribed genres” and “conventions” raise a conversation about autonomy in literature during the emergence of modernist aesthetics. Rukeyser in *The Book of the Dead* reevaluates these conventions while also redefining what shape and style documentary rhetoric should take. Does the poet’s resistance toward rhetorical “assumptions” contribute to the politics within her poetry? Since she specifically writes about documentary accounts in *The Book of the Dead*, how does Rukeyser’s usage of modernist techniques also bolster her audience’s understanding of history and reality?

This paper grapples with the first question by closely examining Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* based on Marxist notions of politics and power. Rukeyser’s text incorporates key recollections and descriptions of tragedy while also rejecting technical expectations rooted in literature. By forgoing constraints based on tradition, Rukeyser’s writing maintains more autonomy to explore the real people behind an industrial disaster. Her work

1 Tim Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead,”* (University of Missouri Press, 2003), 1.

2 Sarah Ehlers, *Left of Poetry: Depression America and the Formation of Modern Poetics.* The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 65.

therefore can hold a mirror to Marxist understandings of capitalism, exploitation, and alienation as discussed in *The Communist Manifesto* and other selected writings by Karl Marx. Understanding Marxist critiques of labor and production allows readers to better comprehend Rukeyser's own confrontation with capitalism and control evident in her modernist poetry.

For the second question I pose regarding how audiences perceive reality through *The Book of the Dead*, I argue that theories found in *Aesthetics and Politics* reaffirm Rukeyser's poetry as maintaining credibility in its representation of reality. Given Rukeyser's deviation from traditional poetic conventions, some may find fault with her fragmented documentation that combines testimonies, statistics, and conversations from victims of tragedy. However, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, the expressionist ideas of Ernst Bloch combined with literary views from Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin provide strong opposition against those who view the avant-garde as disconnected from reality. Apologias from these figures effectively depict the potential for modernist writing to capture real life in ways traditional forms may not. They therefore position Rukeyser's poetry as capable of transforming surface-level knowledge into collective truths about exploitation under modernization.

Finally, the paper brings together both of its key questions by synthesizing Marxist politics and modern aesthetics found in Rukeyser's poetry. I contend that *The Book of the Dead* addresses controversy in a controversial literary manner, causing the poetry to embody a historical experiment both in political and aesthetic approaches. By looking at Ernst Bloch's *On Karl Marx* and Avery Slater's "American Afterlife: Benjaminian Messianism and Technological Redemption in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*," I assert that the modernist devices Rukeyser uses allow for her work to best capture the objective world according to Marxism. In doing so, I also maintain that her collage of reality haunts readers as they come to understand the tragedies of the working class. *The Book of the Dead* therefore operates not only as a modernist account of history, but also exists as a soul-stirring emancipation that reckons with literary and political conventions.

II. Historical background: The Hawks Nest Tunnel tragedy in *The Book of the Dead*

Rukeyser's work recollects the true events from the 1930s of the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster. This incident stemmed from a business operation by Union Carbide that involved three miles of a tunnel with a 30-foot diameter diverting Gauley Mountain, a "scenic cliff in the New River Gorge, in West Virginia."³ The drilling conducted for the tunnel was seen "as a business-critical requirement" for the plant Union Carbide had in a nearby town called Alloy.⁴ At the time of the tunnel construction, the Great Depression had corporations scrambling to sustain the economy and workers desperate for work. Commercial pressures also led the operation to be licensed as a "civil engineering project," which further relaxed any safety requirements for the workers involved.⁵ This lack of protection for laborers and capitalist incentive for corporations foregrounded the very loss that *The Book of the Dead* captures.

The poetry collection relies on the facts of the tragedy that inextricably link the fates of laborers to corporation. This is evident in the first poem of the collection titled "The Road," in which the speaker maps out "the hard and stone-green river / cutting fast and direct into the town."⁶ Although the separation between the river and the town manifests itself in the line break here, the proximity of the two within the poem reiterates the physical and symbolic reach of the Hawks Nest Tunnel tragedy. This becomes more transparent and unconventionally explicit in later poems such as "Statement: Philippa Allen" and "The Disease," where Rukeyser is able to take new visual technologies such as X-rays and adapt them into poetic form.⁷ The poet's ability to create pieces that are mimetic of an X-ray morphs together the science and the conscience as they confront fatal prognosis from the aftermath of industrial work. Rukeyser's docupoetic accounts of deathly chemicals and terminal diagnoses

3 Nayab Sultan, "Hawks Nest Disaster," *Tunnels & Tunnelling International* (07, 2016), 29–33, <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/hawks-nest-disaster/docview/1806429761/se-2>.

4 Sultan, "Hawks Nest Disaster."

5 Sultan, "Hawks Nest Disaster."

6 Muriel Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, in *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 74.

7 David Kadlec, "X-Ray Testimonials in Muriel Rukeyser," *Modernism/modernity* 5, no. 1, January 1998): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.1998.0020>.

are further amplified by the fact that samples taken during initial scoping of the tunnel area revealed most of the tunnel being dug contained “a particularly high grade of silica bearing sandstone.”⁸ Although these findings established concern for the safety of workers, they were denied when Union Carbide claimed to be unaware of any silicon dioxide.⁹ This denial is captured in a poem such as “Praise of the Committee,” where the speaker oscillates between the voice of institutions claiming to preserve the will of the people and the actual reality of the lawsuits, monetary costs, and sheer helplessness of the tragedy’s victims. The tunnel construction itself therefore takes on not solely a financial cost, but a price paid in 10-hour shifts done six days a week by approximately 2,982 men that resulted in the inhalation of harrowing quantities of silica dioxide.¹⁰ This price was also paid disproportionately, given that Black workers made up about 80 percent of the workforce for the tunnel and were often forced to work in the areas where silica concentration and exposure were highest.¹¹ Accounts of the construction detail the men who became too sick to work and the mountain entrance of the tunnel that became known as the “Village of Death.”¹² Given the fast pace and strict enforcement of labor, construction of the tunnel finished ten weeks early in September 1931.¹³

What Muriel Rukeyser must reckon with in her poems is the paradoxically unclear yet recognizable aftermath of the industrial disaster. The absence of protections for workers contributed to uncertainty for the exact number of deaths related to the incident. However, following the 1986 research of epidemiologist Martin Cherniack, more data revealed that approximately 764 workers died from acute silicosis or related conditions.¹⁴ This estimation formulated decades after the incident markedly contrasts with the initial documentation of 476 deaths that was presented to the United States House of Representatives in 1936.¹⁵ The recognition of how expansive the fatalities were came decades late and proved insufficient to emancipate the victims in court. Two high-profile cases in 1933 and 1934 yielded \$200,000 in compensation, with individual awards ranging from only \$30 to \$1,500.¹⁶ The national press also initially circulated rumors of mass graves at the site in West Virginia, which resulted in a call for further investigation into the “corporate negligence” that occurred at the Hawks Nest Tunnel.¹⁷ However, press coverage and attention that followed the controversy of the disaster quickly waned.¹⁸ This lack of emancipation under law and capitalism therefore presented Rukeyser with a disaster seeking any potential redress beyond institutions that profit from silencing the dead.

III. Marxist alienation and commodification in *The Book of the Dead*

At its core, Muriel Rukeyser’s collection of twenty different poems in *The Book of the Dead* brings awareness to the harrowing casualties of an industrial catastrophe. She relies on documentary poetry, or docupoetics, to draw directly on “sentimentalized subjects” in congressional testimonies, data, and vivid descriptions of the people and land of unmarked graves where many workers died.¹⁹ The poetry’s fragmentation, montage, and collage depict detriments of modernization, and the poet “experiments” with assumptions held about the conventions of documentary poetry.²⁰ Rukeyser reconfigures poetics by utilizing genre-mixing and fusing together “amorphous” pieces in a way that often receives criticism for lacking clarity associated with simpler and more direct verse.²¹ In doing so, she breaks from traditional forms of stanza and rhythm, but not solely as a protest against genteel

8 Sultan, “Hawks Nest Disaster.”

9 Sultan, “Hawks Nest Disaster.”

10 Sultan, “Hawks Nest Disaster.”

11 Kadlec, “X-Ray Testimonials,” 24.

12 Sultan, “Hawks Nest Disaster.”

13 Sultan, “Hawks Nest Disaster.”

14 Sultan, “Hawks Nest Disaster.”

15 Sultan, “Hawks Nest Disaster.”

16 Sultan, “Hawks Nest Disaster.”

17 Kadlec, “X-Ray Testimonials,” 24.

18 Sultan, “Hawks Nest Disaster.”

19 Ehlers, *Left of Poetry*, 65

20 Ehlers, *Left of Poetry*, 65.

21 Ehlers, *Left of Poetry*, 197.

methodology. Rather, her poetic style champions “workers’ songs and people’s ballads” to protest powers that exploit and distance the dead from justice.²²

The exploitation and alienation in Rukeyser’s collage of poems correlate significantly to political and economic writings from Karl Marx. As depicted in Rukeyser’s poem “West Virginia,” a “scene of power” in one stanza leads to clarification of work having been “done by the dead” in another.²³ This poem satirizes enthusiasm over colonial progress, and its reference to lives lost depicts certain men as expendable. The two lines therefore capture Marx’s notion of man becoming estranged from his work, since each line is separated into two different stanzas. As a result, the dead remain alienated from the “scene of power” built from work and loss. Even as this poem about a specific place ends, Rukeyser’s collage allows concepts of exploitation and alienation to carry over into a poem about a specific person in “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones.” This poem captures Marxist understandings of a worker as he “appears in the form of alienation, because its subject, man, is a being alienated from itself.”²⁴ This alienation from oneself occurs in the poem when Vivian Jones observes men working on the dam and then “feels in his pocket the picture of his girl, / touches for luck.”²⁵ Despite the hopefulness of “luck,” he then “stamps in the deep snow” as well as “stamps this off his mind again.”²⁶ Vivian Jones becomes alienated from his own thoughts that remind him of a sense of self, and the poem fragments into pieces of hope and hopelessness. Repetition of “stamps” reaffirms how aggressively his work alienates him. Vivian Jones in the poem therefore embodies a personified version of the Marxist idea that production is the worker’s “torment.”²⁷ Through Marxist theory, this focus on man’s strained relationship allows Rukeyser to directly confront capitalism in her poetry.

In addition to confronting alienation, poems in *The Book of the Dead* also grasp the loss of humanness Marx says occurs from commodification. Marx himself describes workers as sinking “to the level of a commodity, the most miserable commodity.”²⁸ This means the working man becomes not just the object, but the “most miserable commodity” stripped of humanness and prescribed value determined by profitability. Such a depiction draws parallels to “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones,” which contains descriptions of how “hundreds breathed value, filled their lungs full of glass.”²⁹ No longer breathing air in the poem, these “hundreds” of workers instead become commodified for the “value” their breath can bring. However, what makes the worker the most miserable commodity in this case is the way the “glass” that gives him value also takes his life. Referring to the workers simply as “hundreds” also further strips these men of their humanity, making them instead mere numbers. Another example of this quantification occurs in Rukeyser’s poem “The Doctors,” where a doctor describes the Gauley Bridge tragedy as “exaggerated” and indicates that “we examined. 13 dead. 139 had some lung damage. / 2 have died since, making 15 deaths. / Press says 476 dead, 2,000 affected and doomed.”³⁰ The poem’s persistent end-stop and curt responses strip the situation down to a matter of numbers removed of emotion. Furthermore, these lines rely on number totals as the subjects of each sentence, adding to the removal of humanity that workers experience despite being ill or dead. Even when the poems do not depict the workers as quantified, they still manage to minimize humanness. In the poem about Vivian Jones, the speaker describes “there, where the men crawl, landscaping the grounds / at the power-plant.”³¹ Depiction of men that “crawl” on all fours draws parallels to Marxist descriptions that indicate for the alienated worker, “The animalistic becomes the human and the human the animalistic.”³² Rukeyser’s poetry therefore conveys the nuances of man losing his humanity, ranging from the way he becomes like an animal to the way he is commodified as a number value under capitalism.

22 Ehlers, *Left of Poetry*, 184.

23 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 75.

24 Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence Hugh Simon (Hackett, 1994), 46.

25 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 79.

26 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 79.

27 Marx, *Selected Writings*, 46.

28 Marx, *Selected Writings*, 58.

29 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 79.

30 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 90.

31 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 78.

32 Marx, *Selected Writings*, 62.

IV. Montage and fragmentation in *The Book of the Dead*

The aforementioned poems depict capitalism as unchallenged, but a poem such as “Praise of the Committee” shows through montage a fight that Marx and Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto* champions. Rukeyser’s “Praise of the Committee” begins with one long stanza that pieces together a montage of committee claims with lived reality. When the poem directs attention to the assumption that “the Committee is a true reflection of the will of the people,” in lines immediately following, it redirects our focus to the fact that “every man is ill” from exposure to poor labor conditions.³³ These two lines from the poem manage to capture the idea from *The Communist Manifesto* of class struggle between “oppressor and oppressed, [standing] in constant opposition.”³⁴ Rukeyser’s poem therefore reveals evidence of such “oppressor” decisions contradicting the reality of the “oppressed” working class. The poem also notably focuses on a “Committee,” which parallels the idea from Marx and Engels that “the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”³⁵ The committee in Rukeyser’s poem may actually represent “the will of the people,” but as clarified with context from *The Communist Manifesto*, the “people” are the bourgeoisie who retain power to benefit themselves. “Praise of the Committee” then introduces a different committee to counteract this one favoring owners of production. The poem calls upon the “Defense Committee” consisting of those who “fight the companies to make somehow a future.”³⁶ In its reference to “companies,” the poem more directly names corporations as culprits for which the workers must work and, paradoxically, against which they must also fight. The warlike diction of “Defense” and “fight” in the poem correlates to the same word choice in *The Communist Manifesto*, which describes the bourgeoisie as having “forged weapons that bring death to itself” through a modern working class of “men who are to wield those weapons.”³⁷ The “fight” addressed in “Defense of the Committee” therefore stems from weapons that capitalism itself creates. With this Marxist background, Rukeyser’s poetry and montage extend beyond a reflection of capitalism, taking on more characteristics of a manifesto that voices the aims of the oppressed.

While Rukeyser explicitly addresses this fight from the working class, she also uses her modern poetics to defy literary constraints and expose contradictions of power holders. This proves especially evident in her poem titled “The Disease: After-Effects,” in which her speaker says that “500,000 Americans have silicosis now. / These are the proportions of war.”³⁸ Reversion back to numbers representing people may first appear reductive. However, Rukeyser’s recognition of these numbers as “proportions of war” alludes once more to the struggle to establish society beyond capitalism. Rukeyser also notably has these jarring proportions told by a Congressman, which calls to mind how *The Communist Manifesto* describes those in power as “like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.”³⁹ Rukeyser fragments her collection of victims’ stories by including this perspective of a Congressman, but in doing so, she conveys how modern industry has extended even beyond the few that hold power. In addition to this fragmentation across poems, she also fragments within the same poem by depicting the incompleteness of the Congressman. She writes how he recalls his childhood, when his own father was impacted by working conditions in the mines.⁴⁰ In barely three lines, Rukeyser has her speaker state that a “strike-broke. / Shot father. He died: wounds and his disease. / My father had silicosis.”⁴¹ The poet brings the policymaker back down to the same fates of Gauley Bridge workers who “died” and “had silicosis” like his father. However, she does this by using actual sentence fragments such as “strike-broke.” and “Shot father.” that depict an incompleteness in the Congressman. In doing so, Rukeyser interrupts the idea of an invincible and total power. This fragmentation ultimately portrays an instability within the modern industry Rukeyser’s work confronts.

33 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 80.

34 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” *The Communist Manifesto* (Pluto Press, 2017), 49.

35 Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 53.

36 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 81.

37 Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 59.

38 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 103.

39 Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 58.

40 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 102–03.

41 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 103.

V. Credibility of Rukeyser's modern poetics according to Bloch

Following discussion of Rukeyser's poetic techniques as political tools, the second question remains about the credibility of reality in her poetics. Theories from Ernst Bloch answer this question by affirming legitimacy of Rukeyser's modernism and expressionism. In *Aesthetics and Politics*, Ernst Bloch argues for an expressionism that retains a "cultural-political aspect" in the formation of modernist works.⁴² As demonstrated by the prior contextualization of Marxism in Rukeyser's poems, *The Book of the Dead* does in fact embody this "cultural-political aspect" by consistently comparing a capitalist culture with political antagonisms in the poetry. However, a counterargument from philosopher György Lukács contends that the expressionist methods Rukeyser uses take on an "emotive, rhetorical, vacuous manifesto" and "declamatory pseudo-activism."⁴³ While Lukács would claim work such as Rukeyser's is a "vacuous manifesto" or "pseudo-activism," Bloch alternatively points out that Lukács only considers a narrow selection of work that does not represent expressionist literature in its entirety. Bloch therefore proposes that one must take into consideration "the core of the matter, the imaginative works which make a concrete impression in time and space."⁴⁴ The documentary nature of Rukeyser's poetry collection does maintain "a concrete impression in time and space," both holistically and literally. In a poem such as "Praise of the Committee," Rukeyser includes mention of "200 cases" pertaining to disaster in a tunnel "3 $\frac{1}{8}$ miles long."⁴⁵ By mentioning the amount of legal cases and length of the tunnel, the poet literally accounts for concreteness in actual "time and space." However, on an overall aesthetic level, Rukeyser also maintains the measured records of the industrial disaster in her poetry. The use of collage in this manner therefore allows Rukeyser to reaffirm her expressionism with direct measurements of reality.

VI. Credibility of Rukeyser's modern poetics according to Brecht

Similar to Bloch, Bertolt Brecht also presents philosophy in *Aesthetics and Politics* that brings credibility to Rukeyser's depiction of real events. Brecht argues true realism does not act only as an "aesthetic optic," but also as a political and philosophical view of society and its material struggles.⁴⁶ Brecht's mention of realism encompassing material struggles pairs with Rukeyser's modernity within her poems. In her piece "Praise of the Committee," Rukeyser includes someone stating that "many of the shareholders at this meeting / were nervous about the division of the profits."⁴⁷ A few lines later in the same stanza, the poet includes mention of "the People's Press, supporting this fight, / signed editorials, sent in funds. Clothing for tunnel-workers."⁴⁸ While still in the same stanza, Rukeyser depicts two very different understandings of material struggles Brecht himself calls to mind. In the first case, she sheds light on the concern regulators have with profit distribution and the excess that occurs under modernization. The second pairing of lines is the antithesis, since Rukeyser captures the working-class fight not just against poor conditions, but also against the lack of basic necessities such as "funds" and "clothes." Without the montage linking these two contrasting experiences, the poet would limit which material struggles she includes in her work. She therefore incorporates Brechtian understandings of realism in a way that captures a more holistic reality in her poetry.

Brechtian realism thus supports the devices Rukeyser uses as being "necessary for a firm grasp of reality."⁴⁹ In *Aesthetics and Politics*, Brecht includes in his discussion of realism the importance of incorporating interior monologue, montage, and the mixing of genres within a single work.⁵⁰ Rukeyser especially includes each of these three elements in her poem titled "Absalom." While the poem may be a testimony, it reads like an interior

42 Adorno, Theodor, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, György Lukács, and Fredric Jameson, *Aesthetics and Politics* (Verso, 2020), 10.

43 Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 11.

44 Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 12.

45 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 80.

46 Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 63.

47 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 80.

48 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 81.

49 Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 73.

50 Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 73.

monologue, starting with the speaker saying, “I first discovered what was killing these men.”⁵¹ The use of first-person perspective and mention of discovery give voice to the speaker’s thoughts in a similar fashion as an internal conversation would. Rukeyser also captures the second element of montage Brecht mentions by piecing together separate occurrences in the same poem. The poet depicts the speaker discussing work in the tunnel and coal mine, silicosis from poor conditions, and lawsuits from deaths. Rukeyser’s montage of these details extends the telling of tragedy beyond the tunnels and into the full extent of loss. Furthermore, Rukeyser incorporates what appear to be lyrics of a song into this poem, following the modernist technique of montages being paired with musical backing. In the last stanza where musical lyricism occurs, the speaker sings that “I open out a way, they have covered my sky with crystal / I come forth by day, I am born a second time.”⁵² Mention of “sky with crystal” brings a tragic beauty to a metaphor for polluted skies and silica that kill the working class. However, the idea of being “born a second time” brings emancipatory hope to an otherwise hopeless situation. By combining poetry with this music, Rukeyser fulfills Brecht’s notion of mixing genres in realism. She manages to capture all three of his elements of realism in a way that both credits her depiction of reality and gives humanity to lives lost.

Rukeyser also accurately reflects reality as understood by Brecht through her lack of rigidity and singularity in depicting capitalism. Brecht stresses that the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat cannot be reduced to a single “plot” to aptly convey the challenges within and produced by capitalism.⁵³ His key critique therefore calls on popular art and realism to seek generous definitions, not ones confined to existing works only.⁵⁴ By using fragmentation, montage, and collage, Rukeyser rejects the idea of confining her poetry to the expectations of existing works. Her piecing together of elements that otherwise should not blend “actively protests the distinction between poetry and public discourse, and by extension between poetry and history.”⁵⁵ Rukeyser therefore allows for the subjective and objective to intertwine as she incorporates both elements of expressionism and realism. This can be seen in the transition from the satirically democratic diction in “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” to the diction in “Praise of the Committee.” In the former poem, Rukeyser’s line “O proud O white O water rolling down” mocks the patriotism that does not truly reflect the reality of capitalism’s exploitation.⁵⁶ The contrast between this line and the experience of Vivian Jones in the rest of the poem reaffirms the artificiality of this patriotism. The latter poem uses similar diction, but in a more matter-of-fact way, as Rukeyser writes that “the Committee is a true reflection of the will of the people.” While this statement appears objective, mention of sickness and loss in following lines reveals the remark as more subjective.⁵⁷ Rukeyser heeds Brechtian caution to avoid singularity of perspective, therefore capturing more angles of the modern reality.

VII. Credibility of Rukeyser’s modern poetics according to Benjamin

A third testament to the reality behind Rukeyser’s poetics can be seen through philosopher Walter Benjamin, who emphasizes the importance of didacticism and moving beyond literary tradition. Benjamin notes in *Aesthetics and Politics* that a didactic poem “would not have to seek approval from a bourgeois public but from a proletarian one.”⁵⁸ While Rukeyser cannot “seek approval” from the dead, she does devote this entire collection of poetry to covering the testimonies, formulas, statistics, and recollections prevalent to the working class. Further, her poetry makes a “demand for accountability” in its inclusion of monologues from individuals such as Mearl Blankenship, Juanita Tinsley, Arthur Payton, and others impacted by tragedy at Gauley Bridge.⁵⁹ By highlighting transparency in her depictions, Rukeyser also creates poetry in which “nothing is hidden and everything is exposed,” therefore

51 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 83.

52 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 85.

53 Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 81.

54 Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 89.

55 Shoshana Wechsler, “A Ma(t)Ter of Fact and Vision: The Objectivity Question and Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘The Book of the Dead,’” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 45, no. 2, (1999): 128, <https://doi.org/10.2307/441826>.

56 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 79.

57 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 80.

58 Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 99.

59 Wechsler, “A Ma(t)Ter of Fact and Vision,” 132.

supporting the proletarian fight to uncover true working conditions.⁶⁰ The poet also adheres to Walter Benjamin's notion of seeing the development of poetry and modernist literature through the process of the historical becoming the new.⁶¹ In her poem, *The Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser writes that "our ritual world / carries its history in familiar eyes."⁶² She conveys a world which relies on "familiar eyes" to carry its history, meaning that the past can be seen in the new as Benjamin describes. Rukeyser also encompasses another idea from Benjamin, which involves the commodity acting as a vehicle to uncover changes in history and modernization.⁶³ In "The Book of the Dead," the poet stresses how one can never forget the "hills of glass, the fatal brilliant plain."⁶⁴ Her reference to "glass" merges "brilliant plain" with a deathly commodity. The proximity of hills, glass, and "the fatal" to one another characterizes the understanding of the industrial tragedy as capable of reshaping the very fabric of nature. Rukeyser therefore captures industrial harm by shaping these "hills of glass" into a tragic vehicle for reflecting on history as Benjamin describes.

VIII. Synthesizing Marxism with aesthetics in *The Book of the Dead*

By combining aforementioned Marxist ideas with literary techniques of modernist thinkers, Rukeyser's poetics ultimately avert further alienation or misinterpretation of the dead. Her poetry captures an idea Bloch himself holds, which is that Marxism "comes to complete expression not in any individual subjective desire," but rather in "an objective superior knowledge in harmony with the real trends of the objective world."⁶⁵ Instead of only portraying the "subjective desire" of people in power, Rukeyser fragments within and across her poetry to include the "objective world." Her poem "Praise of the Committee" achieves this by alternating between legal jargon and colloquial language to provide the "complete expression" Bloch characterizes as Marxist. What makes her poetry "superior knowledge" is her refusal to include only the scenes of power for those overseeing modern industry. This is evident in "The Disease: After-Effects," where Rukeyser uses montage to take fanfare from a "life of a Congressman" and juxtapose it with loss from a "gentleman from Montana."⁶⁶ Rukeyser brings up painful and "real trends" of struggle for this official in power. However, she fragments her poem further with the line stating, "Bill blocked; investigation blocked."⁶⁷ Before readers can feel sympathy for the Congressman's past, they are redirected to the very objective reality of the present, where alienation prevents justice for the exploited. Rukeyser therefore uses fragmentation to obtain "the real freedom of research" that Bloch says Marxism fights for.⁶⁸ Without her modern aesthetics, Rukeyser risks losing this freedom to a "mere illusory freedom."⁶⁹ She constructs her poetry free from traditional constraints, which follows Bloch's declaration that "whoever is seeking for truth must enter the realm opened up by Marx."⁷⁰ The poet therefore maneuvers aesthetics in her poems with a political lens pursuing this realm of "truth" and reality.

However, Rukeyser does not just interpret this truth, but actively defies literary constraints to change limitations of how truth is perceived. To understand this difference between interpretation and change, one must acknowledge Bloch's analysis of Marxism, which states that thinkers "have only interpreted and contemplated the world, but have not intervened in it."⁷¹ Bloch argues that Marxist aesthetics must also involve "a direction of concrete action."⁷² He therefore sees a "permanent relationship of interaction" between theory and practice

60 Wechsler, "A Ma(t)Ter of Fact and Vision," 133.

61 Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 150.

62 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 108.

63 Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 154.

64 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 107.

65 Ernst Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, trans. John Maxwell (Herder and Herder, 1971), 124–25.

66 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 102–03.

67 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 104.

68 Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, 123.

69 Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, 123.

70 Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, 124.

71 Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, 130.

72 Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, 131.

according to Marxism.⁷³ For Rukeyser, poetry takes this “direction of concrete action” through refusal to alienate or end the lived experiences of the dead. In her poem “Absalom,” Rukeyser documents the words of a mother who mourns the death of her son. However, the poet does not stop at the realization of “what the trouble was” that took so many lives.⁷⁴ Instead, she includes the mother in this poem declaring, “He shall not be diminished, never; / I shall give a mouth to my son.”⁷⁵ With this tonal shift moving away from alienation, Rukeyser sustains the story of a working class fighting for justice. She continues documenting this fight in “The Doctors,” where a doctor is asked to “tell the jury whether or not those lungs were silicotic.”⁷⁶ Although there is an objection to the request, Rukeyser indicates in the poem that the judge overrules it. The doctor then responds with an answer that “they were.”⁷⁷ Rukeyser fragments her collection by including this congressional hearing that disrupts poetic lyricism. However, in doing so, she encompasses both attempts to silence and refusal to ignore the demise of working men. The affirmation “they were” does not add any lyrical quality to Rukeyser’s poetry, but it does remind those in the congressional hearing that lives did exist and were in fact taken away.

IX. Emancipation and haunting from Rukeyser’s politics and aesthetics

Based on the synthesis of politics and aesthetics in Rukeyser’s work, *The Book of the Dead* manifests a collective emancipation Avery Slater defines in “American Afterlife: Benjaminian Messianism and Technological Redemption in Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*.” In this piece, Slater depicts Walter Benjamin as perpetuating “sociopolitical messianism” that mirrors how Rukeyser invokes “justice for laborers killed in an industrial disaster.”⁷⁸ Slater therefore describes Benjamin in agreement with Rukeyser’s modern poetics, and he provides credibility to Rukeyser’s methods. However, she also clarifies that Benjamin and Rukeyser “give rise to new desires for solidarity: not with future generations but, rather, with the dead.”⁷⁹ In *The Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser confirms this solidarity when she describes that “planted in our flesh these valleys stand, / everywhere we begin to know the illness, / are forced up, and our times confirm us all.”⁸⁰ The poet provides imagery of nature coming together in solidarity with the dead, so that the reality of illness stays “planted in our flesh.” She therefore has the dead seemingly “forced up” into the conscience of the living. In later lines of the poem, her collective use of “our” in the line stating “these are our strength, who strike against history” more explicitly adheres to Slater’s mention of solidarity with the dead.⁸¹ This solidarity, according to Slater, “offers a way of imagining the afterlife from within the utopian impulses of the living.”⁸² Her solidarity therefore exists between those who died, but also between the dead and the living whom Rukeyser urges to remember.

While the emancipation and solidarity in her poetry bring hope, Rukeyser also documents tragedy in a way that haunts readers into reckoning with modern industry. Slater confirms this in her work, relating how the actual Egyptian book of the dead from which Rukeyser draws inspiration is “designed to promote haunting.”⁸³ This “haunting” vividly appears in Rukeyser’s poem “Absalom,” where a song contains the lyrics saying, “I am born a second time, / I force a way through, and I know the gate / I shall journey over the earth among the living.”⁸⁴ Rukeyser includes this lyric about someone who can “journey over the earth among the living,” shifting the poem from a mournful to an eerie tone. However, with a Marxist understanding of this fragment in the poem, she depicts more than just a spectral figure. This ghostly imagery captures one of the dead forcing “a

73 Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, 132.

74 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 85.

75 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 85.

76 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 92.

77 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 92.

78 Avery Slater, “American Afterlife: Benjaminian Messianism and Technological Redemption in Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*,” (*American Literature* 86, no. 4, 2014), 768, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2811802>.

79 Slater, “American Afterlife,” 772.

80 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 108.

81 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 109.

82 Slater, “American Afterlife,” 774.

83 Slater, “American Afterlife,” 778.

84 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 85.

way through” the confines of death to bring recognition of those sacrificed under capitalism. In her own poetic choices, Rukeyser also forces a way through the confines of death to continue telling the stories of what really happened at Gauley Bridge. Furthermore, as Slater indicates, Rukeyser uses her “prophetic lyricism” to reckon “not with an unredeemed future but with an unredeemed past.”⁸⁵ In *The Book of the Dead*, she directly addresses “you young, you who finishing the poem / wish new perfection and begin to make; / you men of fact, measure our times again.”⁸⁶ While she references the “young” and “new perfection,” the focus of the three lines centers on her instruction to “measure our times again.” Rukeyser therefore does not call upon the “young” to see subjectively, but rather tells them to objectively “measure” as she did through her collage of facts and figures. She speaks from the perspective of the dead to request measurement of “our times,” portraying the lives lost as seeking redemption instead of alienation from justice. With this instruction, Rukeyser halts those “finishing the poem” and forces them to reconsider the true tragedy that lingers from industrial demise.

X. Conclusion: Expanding the montage

Muriel Rukeyser does not just persuasively depict the nuances and losses from the tragedy at Gauley Bridge. With vivid testimonies, dialogues, and statistics, her poetry reaffirms a capacity for modern poetics to capture reality. Implementing Marxist concepts of alienation and exploitation, Rukeyser approaches *The Book of the Dead* with the backing of a theorist who called for revolutionary action within his own writing. Rukeyser’s poems also retain elements of a manifesto that call attention to dangers of unchecked modernization, yet mimic the very technological advancements of a modernist era. This is achieved through reliance on montage and camera-like snapshots that compel an active audience rather than passivity with a typical narrative structure. Her poetry requires readers to piece together the ends and beginnings of stanzas in a way that transcends any meaning the closed form of a narrative reproduces. This allows Rukeyser’s use of montage, collage, and fragments to actually capture a more holistic picture of the disaster than industry would rather have audiences receive. *The Book of the Dead* therefore takes on the challenge of documenting social antagonisms and historical loss without adhering to conventions that limit political influence.

Rukeyser’s methods do not comply with traditional lyricism in poetry, but given the aesthetic affirmation of Bloch, Brecht, and Benjamin, they receive credibility in their depiction of reality. The poet manages to fragment her poems in a way that both includes a collage of resources as well as documents the truth of a real tragedy. Her poetics may not conform with typical expectations of literary canon, but key thinkers support the notion of pushing beyond the aesthetic boundaries of classical poetic forms. Without this experimentation with aesthetics, the nuances of the stories Rukeyser documents risk being disregarded or misinterpreted. Furthermore, Rukeyser’s paradoxical ability to adapt poetry to industrial progression also heightens the potential for capturing audiences of corporate thinkers and industry leaders. Her fragmentation within and across poems then allows for Rukeyser to juxtapose the reality capitalist powers want to portray with the reality of the working class. When synthesized with Marxism in her poetry, these aesthetic choices fight against further alienation and exploitation of the dead. Rukeyser’s writing therefore liberates those it documents by way of its own liberation from literary constraints.

The reality of this emancipatory effect, however, brings readers back to the haunting recognition of what *The Book of the Dead* truly surfaces. More than just a fight for future progress, Rukeyser’s poetry collection calls for redemption first and foremost for the dead. The poet tells these dialogues and testimonies to continue a confrontation with tragedy that those looking forward to the future likely miss. Without her modern poetics, Rukeyser must choose between those who no longer have a voice and those focused on a voice for the future. Her experimentation with modernity therefore expands the possibilities of poetry to capture both. Instead of ending the stories of the dead at their last breath, Rukeyser breathes life into the potential for emancipation in a secular afterlife. She constructs her collection of poems exactly in this way, by freeing her own poetics from tradition and rigidity. *The Book of the Dead* therefore moves past political and literary confines when telling the real tragedies of those who have passed to those who must remember.

85 Slater, “American Afterlife,” 782.

86 Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, 109.

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