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MURIEL RUKEYSER'S *THE BOOK OF THE DEAD* AND THE REPRESENTATIONAL CHALLENGES OF SLOW VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT
The events narrated in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* (1938) constitute a good example of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," a type of "attritional," non-spectacular violence that seems to resist effective literary representation. This essay focuses on the strategies Rukeyser deploys in order to overcome the representational limits posed by Nixon's "slow violence": the patchwork of genres, the choice of a polyphonic poem-sequence structure and, last but not least, the visible process of "wastification" of the tunnel workers, who play such a central role in the poem. Read in the light of recent scholarship on waste, Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* emerges as one of the first poem sequences to explore the conjunction of material toxic waste (silica dust) and human "wastification."

RESUMEN
Los sucesos narrados por Muriel Rukeyser en *The Book of the Dead* (1938) constituyen un buen ejemplo de lo que Rob Nixon denomina "violencia lenta," un tipo de violencia alejada de la espectacularidad, violencia de progresivo "desgaste" difícil de trasladar a una obra literaria. Este artículo estudia las estrategias desplegadas por Rukeyser para superar esos obstáculos a la hora de representar literariamente la "violencia lenta": optando, primero, por un *patchwork* de géneros, eligiendo, además, la estructura del poema-secuencia polifónico y, por último, dando visibilidad al proceso de "wastification" o "basurización" de los mineros que protagonizan el

poema. Leído desde la óptica de las recientes corrientes críticas conocidas como Waste Studies y Waste Theory, *The Book of the Dead* se erige como una de las primeras obras poéticas en examinar de forma conjunta la materialidad de los desechos tóxicos (el polvo de sílice) y la "basurización" humana.

"… a friend who had lost the hard drive that contained her life's digital history […] sought my advice for its recovery. I told her that the thing about data is it's not invisible; it's there, in traces. Every byte has its physical form. Poetry, I remember thinking, fills in the gaps" (Moore 45)

One of the things that poems can do, Catherine Venable Moore reminds us, is to "fill in the gaps" when historical traces have been lost or erased. This may be the reason why Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* has caught the attention of twenty-first century critics. Originally published in 1938 as part of her larger *U.S. 1* collection and reissued in 2018, Rukeyser's poem-sequence both documents the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster and reinvents it poetically.[1] The poet not only pays homage to those workers who were fed to the insatiable monster-process of capitalist growth, but also attempts to capture what Rob Nixon calls the "slow violence" involved in this tragedy.

In his ground-breaking *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Nixon describes slow violence as that which "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that […] is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive" (2). This type of violence is characterized by an insidious "temporal dispersion" (3): in contrast to the sudden violence of an explosion or a car crash, it takes time (from months to years) for the effects of slow violence to become fully visible and accounted for. Among other things, the fact that the "health effects of toxic pollution" are often delayed in time proves detrimental to the "local communities' ability to act preventively, making environmental justice harder to achieve" (Navas et al 2). In addition, slow violence is deliberately concealed by its perpetrators: the main agents of extractive capitalism, corporations, aided by conniving socio-political

[1] While most studies of Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* tend to examine it in isolation from the rest of *U.S. 1,* much can be gained if we recontextualize it in the collection where it first appeared, as Chris Green argues in *The Social Life of Poetry* (2009).

apparatuses. These actors not only resort to mechanisms of obfuscation and misinformation, but they also rely on the extreme vulnerability of the victims. This takes us to the concept of human "wastification" (Simal-González 2), a process whereby the capitalist logic of environmental destruction and exploitation is projected onto the workers themselves. Although the conjunction of toxic waste and racial/social injustice was already a major concern for the late-twentieth-century environmental justice movement in the US, Nixon's recent theorization of slow violence can help us to better apprehend the process that turns human beings into disposable waste. One could conclude that slow violence is in fact mandated by our economy of waste: the sacrifice of "dispensable"—often "anonymous" (Rukeyser 96)—people is both a necessary condition and a by-product of extractive-industrial capitalism, which in turn feeds our unbridled consumerist urges.

Nixon contends, however, that slow violence is often too slippery for scientists to accurately measure and, more central to our purposes, it also eludes effective artistic representation. Capturing the non-spectacular nature of slow violence in films and literature is an arduous task, because writers and filmmakers need to engage readers and spectators "emotionally," while at the same time enabling them to fully grasp the complexity of the phenomenon:

> How do we bring home—and bring emotionally to life—threats that take time to wreak their havoc, threats that never materialize in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene? Apprehension is a critical word here, a crossover term that draws together the domains of perception, emotion, and action. To engage slow violence is to confront layered predicaments of apprehension: to apprehend—to arrest, or at least mitigate—often imperceptible threats requires rendering them apprehensible to the senses through the work of scientific and imaginative testimony (14).

It is precisely this difficulty in capturing slow violence in the "imaginative" realm of literature that Rukeyser will grapple with in her work.[2]

[2] Already in 1997, Tim Dayton acknowledged the artistic difficulty involved in her project, even if not couched in Waste Theory or ecocritical terms (225). More recently, in 2019, Sarah Grieve has interpreted Rukeyser's poetry as an example of "environmental justice witnessing," although her analysis does not incorporate Nixon's concept of slow violence. As I was copyediting this essay, I came across a Master's

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1. TUNNELITIS, OR THE EMERGENCE OF SLOW VIOLENCE

According to Martin Cherniack, the incident known as the Gauley Bridge or Hawk's Nest tunnel "tragedy"[3] constitutes the "Worst Industrial Accident" in US history. In the late 1920s, West Virginia, in an attempt to improve its ailing economy, embarked upon an ambitious hydroelectric project, involving two dams, two tunnels and two power plants, to be built by Union Carbide and Carbon (UCC) corporation and its subsidiary companies in the Gauley Bridge area. It is worth noting that, although this was a public-private venture, all the infrastructures were imposed by the company, following its own production scheme, which required both water and silica. By the time that the actual construction of the industrial project began, the Great Depression was already hitting the country. In this context, UCC and its subsidiaries had plenty of "disposable" human beings to choose from. The bulk of the workforce hired to drill the tunnels was made up of desperate workers hailing from other states—most of them African Americans from the "Deep South" (Dayton 223-224)—and the local population, who first saw these migrant workers as a source of revenue, ended up resenting them and perceiving them not just as outsiders, but as "undesirables" (Moore 33). These attitudes contributed to the process of dehumanization of these workers who, filtered by the warped logic of unbridled capitalism, were ultimately perceived as "disposable."

Tunnel construction had always been a dangerous enterprise, as well as a technical challenge. By the 1930s, however, drill-work had replaced the more rudimentary methods of the past and, although one could expect the occasional blast, those risks seemed to be under control. Still, industrial mining continued to involve a less obvious, more insidious hazard: the by-product of drilling the rock was silica

Thesis, presented by Kaitlyn Michelle Samons in 2020, which briefly analyzes Rukeyser's poem from the point of view of slow violence (pp. 12-13). My approach here is rather different, deriving as it does from a larger framework, Waste Theory, which urges us to explore the toxification and degradation of the environment, its "wasting," side by side with "the toxic configurations of power that transform human beings into literal or figurative waste" (Simal-González 2). Still, I want to acknowledge the felicitous coincidence. I am grateful for the anonymous reviewers for calling my attention to the most recent contributions to the ongoing conversation on Rukeyser's work.

[3] For more information about the disaster, see Cherniack 12-16. Rukeyser is aware of the fatalistic connotations of the word "disaster" (65; see Altman 2004); similar connotations accrue to terms like "tragedy" and "accident," which apparently absolve corporations of their criminal actions.

dust.[4] Paradoxically enough, this undesirable by-product was not only desired but needed by corporations like UCC. They were of course aware of the dangers of the drillers' exposure to this toxic, residual dust. Day after day, the crystalline silica particles generated in the course of digging the tunnel were inhaled by the workers. This attritional, unrelenting process led to the irreversible deterioration of their health: in a matter of months, most tunnel workers had developed a lung condition, the most obvious symptom being shortness of breath. Gradually but inexorably, these men started to waste away and die—the speed of this "slow violence" depending on their degree of exposure to the toxic dust. In the end, at least 746 workers—almost a third of those involved in the tunnel operation[5]—died of what Rukeyser calls "TUNNELITIS" (86), i.e. silicosis. What she describes, then, was not a solitary episode or a tragic accident, but an accretive situation whereby hundreds of workers became literally invaded by silica dust, the waste product of extractive industries that also fed manufacturing industries (see Rukeyser 66-67). In other words, the gradual and non-spectacular nature of the toxification that Rukeyser portrays fits Nixon's definition of "slow violence."

Rukeyser's interest in the pernicious effects of extractivism[6] was already visible in an earlier short poem, "Sand-Quarry with Moving Figures," published as "Sand-Quarry" in *Poetry* in 1935, and included in her debut collection, *Theory of Flight*. The "focalizer" in this narrative poem is a child whose father takes to see the quarry he owns. The actual pit is surrounded by "ruined marshlands," burnt and lifeless. The child is both frightened and appalled by what she sees:

> I reached my hand to his [her father's] beneath the lap-robe
> as we looked at the stripe of fire, the blasted scene,
> "It's all right, he said, they can control the flames" [. . .]

[4] While this exposure could be minimized, worker protection was costly in both time and money (Kalaidjian 68; Dayton 224).

[5] In her 2018 introduction to Rukeyser's poems, Moore (6) points out that the death toll is at least 746, although she has managed to identify only 130 workers (see pp. 53-59). As to the estimates of the people involved in tunnel drilling, according to the data provided by UCC itself "a total of 4887 men were employed in the construction of the hydroelectric complex, 2982 of whom worked at least some of the time in the tunnel itself" (Dayton 223).

[6] For an excellent analysis of the poem from the perspective of "resource poetics," see Parks 2021. Justin Parks describes such poetics as using "the specific rhetorical capacities of poetry to encode our relationship with extractivist practices on both thematic and structural levels" (397).

> But I was terrified of the stubble and *waste* of black,
> and his ugly villages he built and was showing me.
> (25, emphasis added)

The father figure in the poem tries to assuage the child's fears by invoking wealth ("We'll own the countryside") and "control," echoing the discourse of progress so often used by corporations, a choice that may be read as an attempt to erase the environmental devastation caused by extractive capitalism. However, it bears stressing that the mirage of the impending wealth—synecdochically represented by the "bracelet" that the father promises will come out of this quarry venture—is jarringly juxtaposed with the contemplation of a "ruined" and charred landscape: "But I remembered the ruined patches, and I saw the land ruined, / exploded, burned away, and the fiery marshes bare. (25)

The closing lines of the poem describe the child's emotional response when she sees their shared last name "painted on stone" in the quarry:

> "That's your name, Father," "And yours!" he shouted, laughing.
> "No, Father, no!" He caught my hand as I cried,
> and smiling, entered the pit, ran laughing down its side. (25-26)

In contrast to the smiling, laughing adult, the child's reaction is to cry and reject both the ownership of the quarry and, indirectly, her complicity in the havoc it wrought. Although "Sand-Quarry," especially in its closing lines, can be faulted with indulging in facile sentimentalism, an autobiographical interpretation would partially account for this sentimental ending. As Moore reminds us, Rukeyser's "father co-owned a sand quarry but lost his wealth in the 1929 stock market crash," so in this poem Rukeyser would be hinting at the ways in which she became gradually aware of the implications of her easy, leisurely life as a child, an early epiphany that would allow her to grow a "social conscience" (9).[7]

Still, if we compare *The Book of the Dead* with "Sand-Quarry," it is undeniable that the 1938 poem sequence displays a higher degree

[7] In addition, the naïve view conveyed in "Sand-Quarry" is enriched and complemented by other poems in the collection, with which it holds an implicit conversation. Although a detailed study of this poem is beyond the scope of this article, I have followed the anonymous readers' advice and offered a brief analysis here. I thank the peer reviewers for the insights they provided on this and other aspects of my paper.

of sophistication and complexity than the earlier poem, which was still too dependent on maudlin sentimentalism. But is it more effective? More specifically, does Rukeyser rise to the representational challenges posed by slow violence? I would contend that, while the short, intense "Sand Quarry" may have its merits, pitting the child's innocence against the father's greed, it does little to explore the intricacies of a socioeconomic system that hinges on the disposability of human lives, for its focus is on a waste(d)land rather than on the workers.

Arguably, then, *The Book of the Dead* is the first American long poem to successfully depict human wastification and slow violence.[8] Read from the perspective of recent Waste Studies and Waste Theory (Morrison, Simal-González, Bell, Armiero), Rukeyser's book hints at the paradox whereby the "wasted" communities of workers are *both* residual *and* pivotal in the capitalist paradigm of growth. In the specific case of Hawk's Nest, as the descendant of one of the victims put it, the corporations were "actively" looking for "people who were poor, who were desperate and uneducated, and shipped them up here. *Expendable* people. People that nobody would miss" (qtd. in Moore 36, emphasis added). If it were not obvious enough, the adjective "expendable" suggests these workers fit Zygmunt Bauman's description of "wasted humans" (58). Burdened by debts or pushed by sheer hunger, these migrant workers had no choice but to take the hardest jobs, inside the tunnel, and under the worst conditions, so that the companies could save time and money. The tragedy does not lie in the fact that hundreds of workers died of silicosis, most of them quite young; the tragedy lies in the fact that these were preventable deaths. The corporations knew this work was dangerous but did nothing to prevent these men from dying, and the lack of federal regulations on the matter made it easier for the companies to look the other way.

[8] Arguably, a few American poets had written about similar diseases (asbestosis, black lung) before, the most obvious example being John Rolfe and his "Asbestos" (1928). However, they had only produced individual, short poems rather than a long, integrated sequence of twenty poems like Rukeyser's.

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2. OVERCOMING THE REPRESENTATIONAL CHALLENGES OF SLOW VIOLENCE

Nixon's slow violence, as we have seen, involves highly slippery actors inflicting gradual harm on vulnerable populations, who become "disposable" beings, and the phenomenon poses serious representational challenges for writers. Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, I contend, can be read as a rather successful attempt to overcome such apparently insurmountable obstacles. In what follows, I will describe three different strategies that she enlists in such a project: first, offering an often-striking patchwork of literary styles; second, opting for a form, the polyphonic poem sequence, which highlights duration and allows the author to incorporate a multiplicity of voices; and, last but not least, capturing the very process of "wastification."

2.1 – PATCHWORK

The first way in which Rukeyser tries to solve the aesthetic problems posed by slow violence is by a puzzling combination of literary genres that disrupts our expectations and prompts us to "contemplate" (Rukeyser 96) rather than just see: a mixture of elegy, transcripts of hearings and courtroom interrogations, real or imagined dialogues, etc. Most critics concur that, when Rukeyser published *The Book of the Dead*, in 1938, she pushed the limits of poetry by combining the documentary impulse with the lyrical drive.[9] The revolutionary nature of her poetics lay precisely "in its dialogic mix of the period's representative discourses and rhetorical styles," including the fashionable (photo)reportage (Kalaidjian 70).[10] In choosing a

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[9] In the 1940s, critics still showed surprise at her audacious juxtaposition of genres. John Brinnin openly criticized the inclusion of "language as barren as statistics" (565-6) in her poems. For an overview of the critical reception of her first volumes of poetry, including the controversy that came to be known as the "Rukeyser Imbroglio," see Kalaidjian 67-71 and Careless.

[10] For a discussion of the relevance of reportage and photojournalism in Rukeyser's times, see Kalaidjian 72-73 and Brinnin 565. While most scholars have alluded to the influence of photo-reportage and film montage, we cannot rule out the direct influence of Cubist and other avant-garde painters' collage. Equally important for the poet is the "mythic purpose" and epic aspiration present in the poem sequence, not so much emulating as responding to modernist epic poems like Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Goodman 270-271). Dara Barnat sees Rukeyser's poetry of witness as following in the steps of Whitman's work (103-104). More intriguingly, Meg Schoerke "traces Rukeyser's

"radically new generic form" that intertwined "verse and reportage," Rukeyser managed to go "beyond Soviet-style proletcult," the "formulaic poetics laced with didactic slogans and stereotypes" that often led to the "verbal impoverishment of political critique" (69, 76). At the same time, her "elevation" of the apparently prosaic diction and the legal-medical-technical jargon to the realm of poetic language worked as an oblique indictment of the elitist nature of poetry and "formalism's aesthetic segregation from the worldly discourses of everyday life" (77).

On the one hand, then, instead of taking a purely journalistic stance, Rukeyser incorporated the insights that poetic language can offer thanks to its "density of texture" (Dayton 225). On the other, she took the somber, elegiac tone that one would expect of a long poem devoted to disease and death, and rendered it specific and political by including archival material. She chose to include a whole array of documentary genres, "from historical narration to courtroom interrogation, the minutes of shareholders' meetings, workers' letters, equations for falling water, the findings of congressional subcommittee hearings, stock quotations and chest X-rays" (Gardinier 95).[11]

I would argue that the inclusion of "scraps" from letters, legal transcripts, and other fragmentary texts often described as "barren" (Brinnin 565) or "prosaic" (Dayton 225) in a long poem that also displays more conventional lyrical sections was the result of her conscious search for the appropriate form to convey the slow unfolding violence involved in the Hawk's Nest disaster. Her insistence on juxtaposing the lyrical and the documentary, collage-style, was not a mere aesthetic experiment in the tradition of art-for-art's-sake; on the contrary, much like the writer-activists Nixon describes in his book

conception of "relationship and process" to her reading of the romantic poets William Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge as well as the biologist D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, thinkers who shared a belief in the transformative power of volatile contraries" (qtd. in Hollenberg 2000, 10).

[11] For some scholars Rukeyser's interest in and incorporation of the archive turn her into one of the pioneers of witness or documentary poetry. In his recent survey of this poetic tradition, Michael Dowdy approaches *The Book of the Dead* as the epitome of classic documentary poetry, relying as it does on facticity, in contrast to later documentary poems shaped by what he calls "shakeout poetics." Despite Dowdy's insightful analysis of the poem sequence, I do not fully subscribe to his view of Rukeyser's text. I find the label of documentary poetry to be slightly reductive: while some of the poems in the sequence are clearly documentary, others do not rely on documents. Thus, the sequence as a whole is better described as a patchwork of genres, ranging from the strictly archival to the purely lyrical.

(15), Rukeyser believed in the social function of art, and *The Book of the Dead* was her own deliberate way of "retrieving" wasted victims from the dumping ground and writing them back into the faceless reports and statistics.

While some poems in the book, like "Statement: Philippa Allen," draw exclusively from archival materials like congressional testimonies, others appear to be intensely lyrical in nature. That coexistence of documentary and lyrical pieces can be found not only within the sequence, but also within some of the individual poems comprising the sequence. In fact, the disruption may be more effective when the lyrical and the documentary are combined within a single poem. In "The Face of the Dam," for instance, Rukeyser patches together documentary "scraps" and rapt lyricism in a seamless manner. In other poems, however, the author wants the stitches in the patchwork to be conspicuous, as can be seen in "The Dam":

> Miss Allen. Mr. Jesse J. Ricks, the president of the Union Carbide & Carbon Corporation, suggested that the stock-holder had better take up this question in a private conference.
> The dam is safe. A scene of power.
> The dam is the father of the tunnel.
> This is the valley's work, the white, the shining. (108)

Here, the abrupt juxtaposition of legal transcripts and metaphorical language in the same stanza highlights the frictions between different discourses. The defamiliarization resulting from this unusual, jarring combination forces the bewildered reader to linger and ponder on how each discourse deals with questions of power and accountability. On the one hand, the UCC president's words, as reported by Philippa to the court, prove his skillful deployment of the stealthily elegant lingo of business and legal transactions so as to shirk his responsibility. As we would expect of a suave agent of slow violence, he suggests but never explicitly states that some things should remain hidden from the public eye: "better take up this question in a private conference." On the other, the lyrical language of the last lines seems to shift the responsibility, agency, and power to the (non-human) environment: "This is the valley's work, the white, the shining." This time, however, the literal message is undercut by the figurative resonance of "white" and "shining," a metaphorical

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reference to the silica dust which becomes fatal because of a deliberate human decision.[12]

2.2.- POLYPHONIC SEQUENCE

Rukeyser resorts to a second strategy in her attempt to rise to the challenges of slow violence: the choice of a specific poetic form, the polyphonic poem sequence, which enables her to approach events from a variety of positions and discourses, thus hinting at the otherwise hidden connections between the different actors in slow violence. Thanks to the sequential, polyphonic nature of *The Book of the Dead,* she manages to tease out the many threads of a complex system, outlining a certain "ecology of slow violence." In trying to neutralize the "distancing mechanisms" (Nixon 41) that conceal the real nature of slow violence, Rukeyser exposes the real forces behind the tunnel "tragedy": the decisive role of corporations, as well as the complicity of politicians, scientists and professionals.

The polyphonic nature of her poem allows Rukeyser to give voice to the diverse actors in the tunnel disaster: the victims and their relatives, doctors and public health experts like Emory R. Hayhurst, social workers like Philippa Allen, politicians… Her polyphonic approach differs from the "monologic tirades against capital" and the "univocal celebration of labor" often found in the political poetry of her contemporaries (Kalaidjian 77).[13] Rukeyser's strategy is more effective than proletcult literature, as the juxtaposition of such diverse voices unveils the structural relationships producing slow violence. As Chris Green rightly claims, the poet "does what the social order strives to avoid: she reveals the connections among seemingly isolated actors" (*Social* 180); she "defies discursive boundaries" and "puts the players together" ("Working" 386). Thus, Rukeyser unveils the suffering concealed in business or scientific discourses: the "cold" facts of measurements ("The Bill"), formulas ("Statement"), or stock quotations ("The Dam") are placed side by side with the victims' emotional anguish.

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[12] As Green perceptively notes, here the poet "inverts her contemporary readers' associations with Appalachia": it is not "the weight of ink-black coal" but "the white dust of silica" that eventually "kills the miner" (174).

[13] Although we can occasionally encounter "proletcult imagery," including the solid presence of the machines of the industrial era and the workers who operate them, such images are "dwarfed by the poem's broader, popular tableau whose democratic vistas reflect the visual expanse of contemporaneous muralist art" (Kalaidjian 82).

The inclusion of poems focusing on different individuals or groups allows for the presence of the victims themselves, as well as that of witnesses and the agents complicit in the slow violence: doctors ("The Disease" or "The Doctors"), undertakers ("The Cornfield"), engineers ("Power"), lawyers... Phillipa, the social worker, would qualify as one of the witnesses, the first person to denounce what was going on in Gauley Bridge. However, presenting Phillipa as the authoritative outsider can be problematic, as she may be construed as speaking for the "subaltern" workers. For Green, such ventriloquism can ultimately deprive the victims of their agency (*Social* 174-5). And yet this is offset by the fact that the victims and their families are also given a voice: Mearle Blankenship, in the homonymous poem, George Robinson, an African American tunnel digger, in his "Blues," or Emma Jones in "Absalom"—a poem we shall see in more detail in the following section.

If the polyphonic mode allowed Rukeyser to give voice to the many people involved in the tunnel disaster, the structural complexity and length of the sequence allows her to cover the entire chronology of the events, from the company's initial plans, in the late 1920s, and the first casualties, in the early 1930s, to the legal battle—including the 1933-1934 trials and the 1936 congressional hearings—and the consequences of the tragedy, thus literally exposing the slow violence inflicted for years. Thus, although her lengthy poetic sequence can be seen as working within the tradition of the "modernist long poem," her intentions differed from those of Eliot and other high modernists. Her choice was determined by her need to explore "the objective horror of the Gauley Tunnel tragedy through a fragmented subjective" form that allowed her to "wrest meaning, even utopian meaning, out of horror" (Dayton 225).[14] I would argue that that the poem sequence Rukeyser chose organically conveyed both the relatively long latency of silicosis and the protracted process of reparation.

2.3- FROM TRANSIENT TO DURABLE

One last way in which Rukeyser exposes the insidious nature of slow violence is by laying bare the politics of human "wastification."

[14] The influence of films is also noticeable here, as in the work of other modernist authors (Dos Passos), because of the editing process and the emphasis on moving time. For a description of Rukeyser's own attempts to turn her book into a documentary film, see Julius Lobo's 2012 article.

The Book of the Dead denounces the discursive system that buttresses our economy of waste by turning the workers not only into nameless, transient commodities, but also into "rubbish."[15] In *Rubbish Theory* (1979) Michael Thompson established the interactions between what he considered to be the two main categories of objects, the "Transient" and the "Durable," that is, those commodities whose value decreases over time and those whose value increases over time, respectively. For Thompson, transient objects could only become durable by going through a limbo stage, that of valueless "Rubbish." The tunnel-diggers that Rukeyser memorializes were seen at the time as mere "hands," an "anonymous" labor force. Their "value," from a capitalist standpoint, diminished over time. Not only that, but their being migrant workers stressed this transience. I would argue that Rukeyser's long poem, in bringing these people back from the dead, tried to render them "durable." However, before their plight had acquired the permanence of historical relevance, these reified humans, like the commodities in Thompson's theory, had to go through the invisible category of waste or "rubbish."[16] In other words, these disposable and "expendable" men, these "wasted" bodies from a "sacrifice zone" (Bauman, Bullard) were first consigned to the dumping ground of hidden graveyards before they could be rescued from oblivion and turned into "durables."

The metamorphosis of workers into transient and expendable beings is visible in several key poems in the sequence. One example is "The Face of the Dam," the fifth poem in *The Book of the Dead,* which hinges on the polyvalent word "value." In this particular context, this term, so redolent of the capitalist discourse, conjures up the

[15] In the second poem in the sequence, "West Virginia," Rukeyser revisits earlier times and "devotes a line to 'an unnamed indentured English servant,' who prefigures in his anonymity the workers who will become afflicted with silicosis in this same country two hundred and fifty years afterwards" (Dayton 229). A similar use of historical figures can be found later, when John Brown is mentioned. For a detailed study of Brown as an insurrectionary figure, see Tales. Dayton sees Brown as a "precursor" because, in his revolutionary actions, "he anticipates the martyrs who are to follow in American history" and are evoked in Rukeyser's poem (230). However, I prefer to read Brown against the grain: thus, historical, individual John Brown would play the role of a transhistorical expendable everyman, "John Doe," but significantly racialized as "brown".

[16] I am aware that I am reading Thompson against the grain, so to speak. In his original theory, as a reviewer rightly points out, it is selective rescuing by the powerful that turns certain types of "rubbish" into "durable" items. Here, however, it is the powerless who are first commodified as transient "items," then dumped, and finally retrieved and re-valued by Rukeyser, who is herself in a position of (representational) power.

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invaluable/deadly dust, and is readily associated with the tunnel workers, both literally and figuratively transient.

"The Face of the Dam" is a witness poem. It bears remarking that the kind of witnessing captured here differs from the more common meaning of witnessing, since it does not involve a brief event but the long, protracted process of human wastification, a process that even extends beyond the lifespan any individual real-life witness.[17] This time, however, unlike the previous "Statement: Phillippa Allen," Rukeyser does not draw upon archival material, but upon the imagined reminiscences of a local, Vivian Jones. Although the poet initially seems to adopt an objective, mostly descriptive mode, the tone waxes elegiac as soon as the man starts reliving the past conjured up by the landscapes he traverses. The scene depicted in the poem takes place during an hour, and the abundant time markers seem appropriate for the central consciousness of the poem, Vivian, who used to work as a locomotive driver: "he can see/ his locomotive rusted on the siding" (Rukeyser 70). Thus, his walk adopts the same regularity as the train he used to drive: "*On the hour* he shuts the door…/ *On the quarter* he remembers…/ *On the half-hour* he's at the Hawk's Nest…" (70-71; emphasis added). Fittingly enough, the closing line also closes the temporal circle, as in a return trip: "he turns and stamps this off his mind again/ and *on the hour* walks again through town" (72; emphasis added).

The description of Vivian's walk, as anticipated, incorporates flashbacks to the time when the tunnel was being built. First, he describes both the potential value of the rock and the dangers that tunnel diggers faced in extracting the "precious […] white glass" (70).[18] Next, he "remembers how they enlarged/ the tunnel and the crews, finding the silica,/ how the men came riding freights, got jobs here/ and went into the tunnel-mouth to stay" (71), the implications being that such lives were swallowed by the tunnel, devoured by the mountain, or rather, by the systemic greed of capitalism. In this poem, the resonant tropes of men "breathing" value (money) and glass (silica) make the causal elements (profit) more conspicuous and the insidious process of the slow death (by silicosis) more tangible. Years after the tunnel was abandoned, Vivian still perceives that the water in the river is ironically "wasted"—in the poem's words, "unused"—even though it has already caused deaths; the fault, of course, cannot lie in the river,

[17] I thank the reviewers for pointing out this significant difference.
[18] For a detailed analysis of the uses of glass in Rukeyser's book, see Kalaidjian 75-76.

much though it is personified as having "done its death-work" (72). Despite the fact that workers "breathed value," to use Rukeyser's metonymy, they themselves were not "durable" elements within the capitalist framework, but only transitorily valuable; to use Thompson's terms, they were "transient" at best.

Later in *The Book of the Dead* we find several poems that highlight the process of "wastification" of workers. No longer useful, the sick workers waste away and become associated with the toxic dust itself. This process is rather conspicuous in "Absalom," a mixed narrative-lyrical poem, where we encounter another witness, Emma Jones, who is also an indirect victim. This time, in contrast to "The Face of the Dam," narrated in the third person, we hear the witness's own voice. Emma presents herself as the one who "first discovered what was killing these men" (Rukeyser 79). When her three young sons and later her husband fall ill, she takes them to the doctors. In the case of the youngest son, 17-year-old Shirley, she must beg for money for an X-ray, which she cannot afford (80).

As several critics have pointed out, Emma seems to be the quintessential victim that Americans might sympathize with—and the media made much of—in the 1930s: the figure of the "suffering mother" (Goodman 273) or the "Migrant Mother," "white, beautiful, and hungry" (Moore 34).[19] To some extent, some of that pathos is reproduced in this poem, but Rukeyser manages to combine mythological echoes with specific archival material, braiding denunciation and hope, even in the face of death. Therefore, in "Absalom," the crying, suffering woman is at the same time the witnessing, fighting woman. Rukeyser "stresses the economic exploitation leading to her desperate struggle to survive and her active role in seeking justice and compensation for her sons," thus departing from "the passive figures" of the suffering mother so common at the time (Goodman 273). By the end of this poem, there is no trace of passivity left in Emma.

Although the main poetic voice in "Absalom" has been ascribed to the mother, I would argue that the poem actually revolves around Shirley, her third son, the Absalom figure whose death Emma laments.

[19] Emma Jones is also reminiscent of the iconic Mother Jones, as Green explains in his 2009 book: "in writing about a mother named Jones who was fighting for miners, Rukeyser raises the ghost of Mother Jones, who had just died in 1930 and who had long campaigned for miners" (179). For a feminist reading of this particular poem, see Kalaidjian 179-81. For a feminist interpretation of the entire book, see Chung, Goodman, Rudnitsky and Ware.

At the end of the first stanza, he is introduced in simple but effective terms: "Shirley was my youngest son; the boy./ He went into the tunnel" (Rukeyser 79). The apparently guileless, fact-focused narration and simple diction that characterize the first stanza give way to the deeply lyrical, subjective tone we find in the next, a stanza that can be assigned to "the boy," Shirley.

My heart   my mother   my heart   my mother
My heart   my coming into being. (79)[20]

This structure is representative of the entire poem: the mother's simple, staccato lines in the odd stanzas (1, 3, 5, 7) alternate with the brief lyrical interludes we find in the even, italicized stanzas (2, 4, 6, 8), until we reach the ninth and last stanza, a couplet that, still in the mother's voice, effectively intertwines both styles. While the odd stanzas move the narrative forward, the even ones evoke the elegiac, disembodied voice of the dying/dead teenager, in words highly reminiscent of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Shirley's voice first appears calling for his mother (Rukeyser 79), then trying to reach the world after death, until finally he tells us he has discovered "the gate" thanks to which he "shall journey over the earth among the living" (82). Arguably, it is Rukeyser's very poetry of witness that becomes that gate, an interpretation confirmed the closing couplet, where the mother proclaims: "He shall not be diminished, never; / I shall give a mouth to my son" (82).

Several scholars have foregrounded the poem's intertextual reference to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (Dayton, Goodman, Green, Scigaj). In my opinion, the insistence of these critics on the mythical resonances of this poem, most notably the Isis figure, may have narrowed down the ways in which "Absalom" has since been read. Although the use of the Egyptian incantations and the title of the poem provide obvious clues, a reading stripped from this mythopoetic accoutrement allows for a different and equally valid interpretation: it is the son rather than the mother who utters/thinks the words in the italicized stanzas.[21] Even as young Shirley wastes away and literally

[20] The way this line is structured is intriguingly reminiscent of a heartbeat. This "life pulse" may be one more way in which Rukeyser tries to render the workers more visible and "fleshed-out," at the same time that she underscores their vulnerability as disposable beings. I thank the first readers of this paper for this insight.

[21] Early analyses of the poem (Dayton, Kalaidjian, Kertesz) assumed that the italicized stanzas correspond to the mother's feelings. I would argue the opposite: these italicized

shrinks, in his agony he still manages to ask his mother "to have them open me up and/ see if that dust killed me" (80). The pathos of the scene is offset by the unsentimental reference to the need for justice and reparation in the lines that follow: "Try to get compensation" (80). Thus, Emma's and others' testimonies—"the whole valley is witness" (81)—, poetically filtered by Rukeyser, become the "mouth" and the "compensation" that Shirley demanded: "They called it pneumonia at first./ They would pronounce it fever./ Shirley asked that we try to find out./ That's how they learned what the trouble was" (82). It can be argued that, gradually but relentlessly, Shirley becomes the very toxic dust that he has breathed in, a dust that permeates his body and is only partly washed off: "I saw the dust in the bottom of the tub" (79). Paradoxically, in contrast to the silica dust itself, the "waste" product of the drilling process, considered extremely valuable, the workers themselves have become rubbish or "waste."

We can conclude that "Absalom" resorts to different thematic and formal tools in order to convey the slow violence of the Gauley tunnel tragedy. In fact, the poem exhibits the three main strategies that Rukeyser enlists to try and overcome the representational obstacles that slow violence poses: it uses different sources and genres ("Patchwork"), it incorporates different voices ("Polyphonic Sequence"), and it also narrates the process of human wastification over a period of time.

The process whereby human beings enter the limbo category of "rubbish" can also be traced in the "The Cornfield." Probably one of the most accomplished poems in the sequence, it may also be the piece that best captures the corporations' attempts to stealthily cover up their actions at Hawk's Nest. The obfuscating "mechanisms" (Nixon 41) that the corporations enlisted in order to hide the insidious nature of slow violence involved several actors, including their doctors, whose complicity in concealing the actual nature of the disease ("The Doctors") were instrumental in keeping people in the dark. More central to our purposes, UCC and its subsidiaries made sure that the victims, the tunnel workers, were hurriedly buried out of sight, not in a graveyard, but in a cornfield (see Moore 42). Rukeyser captures that moment in a homonymous poem that, once more, interweaves the lyrical with the political.

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lines correspond to Shirley, which does not mean that Emma functions merely as a vehicle for her son's subjectivity.

The author's sense of urgency, her need to reach a wide readership and different sensibilities, leads her to imagine multiple points of entry into "The Cornfield." "For those given to contemplation" (Rukeyser 93), the poetic voice describes a domestic scene and urges us to "contemplate" again and again. However, by the time the imperative reappears at the end of the poem (96), "contemplate" has acquired a multi-layered meaning: the neutral "watch" becomes the injunction to "stop and think," and ultimately "draw your conclusions." Next, the poet offers a stanza "for those who like ritual" (94), conjuring up the mythical-historical resonances of corn—"swear by the corn" (94)—, but actually lingering on the despicable, stealthy ways in which the corpses were dispatched, thanks to the caretaker's cold connivance. The following stanza is addressed to "those given to voyages" (95) but who are also looking for the real America—a concern suggested by the first poem of the sequence, "The Road," and by the title of the collection where it originally appeared, *U.S. 1*. On finding that special cornfield, the "tourist" will learn that it was actually used as an improvised graveyard—hence the ironic "misuse of land" for which the caretaker's mother was suing his son (95). "For those given to keeping their own garden" opens the last long stanza, which enlarges the significance of the Hawk's Nest crime by providing another mythical layer: "Abel America, calling from under the corn,/ Earth, uncover my blood!/[…] Marked pointed sticks to name the crop beneath./ Sowing is over, harvest is coming ripe" (96; see Slater). The couplet that closes the poem, extracted from the actual hearings, is the answer to a question that appeared in earlier stanzas but went unanswered: do the workers diagnosed with this incurable lung disease "liv[e] in fear/ or do they wish to die?" (95). The last line provides an irrefutable answer: "They want to live as long as they can" (96).

The caretaker's justifications for his actions, reported in the second stanza, hypocritically put the blame on the victims themselves: "Negroes who got wet at work,/ shot craps, drank and took cold, pneumonia, died" (94). When these tunnel workers are next mentioned, they are deprived of their humanity and, in a significant metonymy, transformed into the very "overalls" (94) they are wearing, which, just like garbage, should be quickly put away and buried. "We dispose of leftovers in the most radical and effective way," Bauman notes: "we make them invisible" (27). The rush and secrecy surrounding the operation is emphasized in the third stanza, where the widow has no time to even dress her husband before burial: "I

know a man/ who died at four in the morning at the camp./ At seven his wife took clothes to dress her dead/husband, and at the undertaker's/ they told her the husband was already buried" (Rukeyser 95; emphasis added). No time for rituals, no time for autopsies.

The last stanza, that devoted to the gardeners, not only plays with the Edenic connotations of the term, but also gathers the main *leit-motifs* of previous stanzas, exhorting us to "uncover," "contemplate," and "voyage" (96), a series of post-Edenic commands that have lost their initial innocence and now urge readers to see beyond the obfuscating strategies devised by the companies and upheld by a system that complicitly shields them from accountability. The "harvest is coming ripe," reads the last line of the stanza, suggesting that all those involved in Hawk's Nest disaster will soon be held accountable.

CODA

As I have tried to demonstrate in the preceding pages, Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* not only memorializes the Hawk's Nest tragedy, but also exposes the slow violence involved in it. Her poem sequence uncovers the true nature of a dis-aster which was not—as the term's etymology misleadingly implies—dictated by the stars but brought about by specific economic actors (corporations like UCC) in a system that both produces and requires wasted lives. However, being dumped and buried, entering the realm of "rubbish," is not the end of the story for these commodified and "used-up" workers. On the contrary, going through the "rubbish" stage, Thompson argued, may be one way in which the "transient" can finally become "durable." In contrast to the capitalist understanding of durability, which hinges on the disposability of both human beings and the environment, Rukeyser gives value to and retrieves those wasted lives. One could say that, through her poetic incantations, she has managed to bring those workers back from the dead. Thanks to her poetry, these transient workers have become "durable" for generations of readers.

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