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A SLOW AND SPECTACULAR VIOLENCE: ANTI-BLACK, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND
LABOR VIOLENCE IN MURIEL RUKEYSER'S *THE BOOK OF THE DEAD*

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Kaitlyn Michelle Samons
May 2020

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

In 1931, between 700 and 800 West Virginian miners died from “acute silicosis,” a lung disorder caused by prolonged exposure to silica dust. This event was dubbed “The Hawk’s Nest Tragedy.” The Hawk’s Nest Tragedy violence was best captured by Muriel Rukeyser in her collection of poems, *The Book of the Dead*. The poems within *The Book of the Dead* are separate from the perspectives of the victims who have died, but also currently serve as some of the few possible lenses for these victims to be remembered. Using Rukeyser’s work, this thesis will explore a single, central, question: How does the relationship between spectacle and slow violence help the reader interpret the politics of Rukeyser’s text? In this thesis, I engage with theorists on spectacular anti-Black violence, environmental and labor violences. I then speak to the theorists by engaging in a conversation on the role of the witness, voyeur, and spectator as defined by Saidiya Hartman and Jean-Paul Sartre; which is pertinent to a conversation on “spectacular” violence. At the conclusion, I explain how spectacular racialized violence is relevant when thinking about environmental and labor disasters like the Hawk’s Nest Disaster. I will prove that the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel Disaster was not just an indiscriminate act of violence upon the poor Black community, I will show that the slow violence that was the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel Disaster was an act of spectacular violence; violence which was systemic, intentional, and repeatable.

DEDICATION

I would like to thank my committee. The professors who worked with me on this paper are truly patient, kind, and understanding. Trust me... you should have seen the first draft.

I would like to thank my parents, who luckily *did not* have to read the first draft.

I would like to (apologize) thank Daniel, who read through every draft.

Finally, I would like to thank my best friend, Sara (no “h”). She told me she would read it, but being her best friend, I chose against giving her anything until the last draft. That is the mark of a truly good friendship.

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Introduction

Camera at the crossing sees the city
A street of wooden walls and empty windows,
The doors shut handleless in the empty street,
And the deserted Negro standing on the corner (Rukeyser, 68).

In 1931, between 700 and 800 West Virginian miners died from “acute silicosis,” a lung disorder caused by prolonged exposure to silica dust. Silica is a common mineral found primarily in quartz. Cutting the silica out of mines is particularly dangerous if the miner does not follow very specific procedural guidelines for protection. In Fayette County, West Virginia, during the early 1930s, miners working for the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation and Rinehart & Dennis Company were knowingly exposed to silica dust, in a horrific event known as the Hawk’s Nest Tragedy. The Hawk’s Nest Tragedy is an example of spectacular and slow violence because the acute silicosis caused mass death both immediately and also through years of sickness; i.e. “slowly.” The Hawk’s Nest Tragedy violence was best captured by Muriel Rukeyser in her collection of poems, *The Book of the Dead*.

Muriel Rukeyser’s collection of poems confronting the Hawk’s Nest Tragedy, *The Book of the Dead*, offers a depiction of spectacular anti-Black, environmental, and labor violence in the United States. Initially published as part of the 1938 volume *U.S. I*, Rukeyser approaches this violence from the perspective of a witness; a term burdened with moral and political obligation. For Rukeyser, the job of “witness” is a responsibility she has taken upon herself. This responsibility is best recognizable in her poem “Gauley Bridge.” Rukeyser *is* the “camera at the crossing” as I will argue throughout this thesis, and “Gauley Bridge” was republished in the 2018 second printing (Rukeyser, 68). In 2018, West Virginia University Press re-released the

collection of poems with a forward written by Catherine Venable Moore. The forward included a few remaining photographs by Nancy Naumburg. Naumburg originally accompanied Rukeyser to Gauley Bridge when Rukeyser initially collected documentation for her poetry. Rukeyser and Naumburg previously decided to make a collection of poems alongside the photographs, but for an unknown reason, this never occurred in print until 2018. In many ways, these photographs, along with Moore's forward, add yet another layer of witness to the original poems. Before analysis, however, it is pertinent to understand the context of Rukeyser's work.

There has been a robust critical reception of Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*. At its initial publication in 1938, Dr. Tim Dayton explains, the piece was "widely reviewed upon publication. Responses to *The Book of the Dead* ranged from embarrassment to enthusiasm" (Dayton, 118). Critics of the book, such as Williard Maas, took issue with Rukeyser's rhetorical decisions; i.e. writing almost *too* journalistically (Dayton, 118). Others, such as Tim Dayton and William Carlos Williams, found little to critique within the work (Dayton, 121). These scholars applauded Rukeyser for her artistic interpretation of this spectacular violence. Presently, Rukeyser's work is making a comeback in literary circles. I believe there are two reasons for this. First, *The Book of the Dead* is a critique of capitalism in the United States. Rukeyser tells the reader very specifically in her final poem "The Book of the Dead", that only "Defense is sight" (Rukeyser, 122). The only possible defense from certain death is the ability to see and recognize the murderous intent of capitalist corporations. If the reader ignores Rukeyser's warning, the readers are no longer blameless in the atrocities committed by such entities. Second, Rukeyser gives power to the reader and writer. Not only is Rukeyser powerful for a classroom, but she is passing on an important message to the next generation of leaders. The reader, who becomes the writer, is too powerful to put down their pen. The more the writer chronicles, the

fewer victims of capitalistic greed. Corporations will not be allowed to get away with murder if they cannot do so in secrecy. No longer will victimhood be anonymous. This brings the reader to the violence that occurred in the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Tragedy.

At least 700 men died during the hydro-electric project in Fayette County, West Virginia, in 1931. Of the group immediately impacted, it is estimated that at least two-thirds of the victims were African American men. Rukeyser situates *The Book of the Dead* much as her narrator positions the camera in the lines above from her poem, "Gauley Bridge." This poem chronicles, much like the other poems in the collection, the faults of the spectator and witness. The poem also chronicles historical examples of not only labor violences, but also of environmental and anti-Black violences. However, the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster is not normally remembered as an act of violence, but as an act of misfortune and accident. This, I believe, is because neither the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation nor its contractor—Rinehart & Dennis Company out of Virginia—were ever punished for murder. Small settlements in 1933 ranging between "\$30 and \$1,600," which went "to only a fraction of the affected workers and their families," did not even begin to compensate for the violence the companies performed (Rukeyser, 7). This violence was enacted on not only the laborers themselves, but also their families. Moore and Rukeyser point out injustices such as how, even in these petty compensation packages, the corporations performed racial violences by giving "black workers...substantially less than their white counterparts" (Rukeyser, 7). Another example comes from "George Robinson: Blues," when the African American laborer, George Robinson, reminisces of a time when he buried "thirty-five [black] tunnel workers [who] the doctors didn't attend [and these workers] died in the tunnel camps, under rocks, everywhere, world without end" (Rukeyser, 85). Rukeyser makes the Hawk's Nest Disaster visible as anti-Black violence through her poetry, but she also intertwines

incredibly important pieces of theory on the environmental and labor violences occurring during the Hawk's Nest Disaster.

Specifically with regards to the Hawk's Nest Disaster, environmental violences are performed on multiple fronts. The first, and most obvious, is the silicosis poisoning. However, another form of environmental violence also occurred. Corporations participated in environmental violence against the low-wage workers by forcing them to work in the 90-99% silicotic mines without following labor protection laws. The deaths of these miners were avoidable, but the means to prevent the environmental dangers were financially detrimental for the corporations to enforce. This can be seen in poems such as "Arthur Peyton" and "The Bill." In "Arthur Peyton" and "The Bill", a miner (Mr. Peyton) who worked for the corporation in 1931, remembers how the overseers would ask the men to "wet the drills [only] when inspectors came" because, as Rukeyser explains in "The Bill", "a fellow could drill three holes dry for one hole wet (Rukeyser, 97 and 114). This is an example of labor and environmental violence and it is here, in Rukeyser's work, that these violences are given a lens. The poems within *The Book of the Dead* are separate from the perspectives of the victims who have died, but also currently serve as some of the few possible lenses for these victims to be remembered. Using Rukeyser's work, this thesis will explore a single, central, question: How does the relationship between spectacle and slow violence help the reader interpret the politics of Rukeyser's text? To answer this question, I will separate the remainder of my paper into three major sections.

The first section is separated into two sub-sections introducing the primary theoretical frameworks that organize my reading of *The Book of the Dead*. Within these sub-sections, I will survey key theoretical terms, texts, and questions, methods, and connect them to Rukeyser's poetry. In Part I, I will engage with theorists on spectacular anti-Black violence (i.e. Grace Hale,

Saidiya Hartman, Koritha Mitchell, and Karida Brown) and in Part II with theorists who work on theories I believe are adjacent to spectacular anti-Black violence because they look at environmental and labor violences (i.e. Robert Bullard, Beverly Wright, and Rob Nixon).

The second main section of this paper will situate Rukeyser's texts within the theories from the previous section. I will separate my section into four parts. First, I will speak to the role of the witness, voyeur, and spectator as defined by Saidiya Hartman and Jean-Paul Sartre. The next two parts will help me complicate the three terms and offer my own definition of a spectator as *an agent who acts without action* while I also look into the role of "Primary" and "Secondary" spectators. My final section will be a close reading of sections of four of Rukeyser's poems.

In the final section, I will explain how spectacular racialized violence is relevant when thinking about environmental and labor disasters like the Hawk's Nest Disaster. At the end of this section, I will prove that the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster was not just an indiscriminate act of violence upon the poor Black community, I will show that the slow violence that was the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster was an act of spectacular violence; violence which was systemic, intentional, and repeatable.

Theoretical Framework

Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* acts as a record of history. The collection of twenty poems is also an example of spectacle and slow violence. As Moore writes in the forward to the collection, the poems are written "through slightly edited fragments of victims' congressional testimony, lyric verse, and flashes from Rukeyser's trip south" (Rukeyser, 12). Rukeyser positions the poems to act as lenses for the actions and results of

the Hawk's Nest Disaster violences. If, in turning back to Rukeyser's poem, "Gauley Bridge" from this thesis' Introduction, I were to ask *how* or *why* Rukeyser asks the reader to think about their own positionality as witness, I would then turn to the camera on page sixty-eight. The camera can "see," but any snapshot must choose *what* is to remain. The camera claims the perspective authority. Rukeyser, likewise, must choose which pieces of information she will include in her work. Rukeyser has the power to adapt the original transcribed writings to a new form (i.e, poetry) and edit the words of the victims. Rukeyser "blurs the camera-glass fixed on the street" and chooses how her audience will remember the Hawk's Nest Disaster. She is the authorial authority on the incidents surrounding the violence (Rukeyser, 68).

Rukeyser uses the camera as a tool to remind the reader of their position in her text and also to clarify *her* position within her own work. Her collection is as much a reflective exercise on her authority as it is a reminder of how useful poetry can be in recording history. Rukeyser is showing how the violence in the Hawk's Nest Tragedy *was* recorded, by literally transcribing the words to a form she finds most suitable. Rukeyser also acts as witness, and asks her reader to act as witness, to how the less immediate (i.e. slow) violence is ignored within Committee transcriptions. Instead, Rukeyser strays from the "official word" by looking around the town and witnessing, with her own eyes and through her own lens, the violence that sits, still, within the town. For instance, within the poem "Gauley Bridge", there are at least four examples of slow violence Rukeyser draws out: 1) "the tall coughing man stamping an envelope"; "the man on the street...leaves the doctor's office...doom"; "the Negro watches [the train] grow in the gray air"; and, lastly, "one's harsh night eyes over the beerglass follow the waitress" (Rukeyser, 68 and 69). The first

example shows that of the aftermath of the Hawk's Nest Disaster which is not included in the 700-800 death toll cited in the introduction: a man dying from (presumably) silicosis *after* the case numbers have been recorded for the public. The second presumes the same. The third instance is coupled with environmental violence as "gray smoke" would impact the lung quality of the townspeople and is probably a result of the previous drillings in the area. Finally, the fourth may speak to the jaded men who live (fearful of death and dying of silicosis with which they may, or may not, have been diagnosed) in the town but prey on the women who also remain due to insecurity and a lack of safety: financially, environmentally, etc. Rukeyser is not telling the reader death toll numbers, as Moore does on fifty-three through fifty-nine of the text; instead, Rukeyser is showing the reader the forgotten ramifications of the three forms of violence I have spoken to thus far: anti-Black, environmental, and labor. As Rukeyser states, "These people [still] live here" within this system of violence (Rukeyser, 70).

Part I: Racial Violence in Rukeyser

I would like to think about how theories of anti-Blackness impact the reading of Rukeyser's collection. Scholarship written by Grace Hale, Sandy Alexandre, Saidiya Hartman, Koritha Mitchell, and Karida Brown is crucial to such a task. One of the key ideas Hale brings to the conversation is on the topic of the "New Negro" in her work *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. Hale speaks about how African Americans born into freedom "recreated" themselves, becoming the "New Negro" (Hale, 17). "African Americans," Hale continues, "constructed new conceptions of their connectedness to counter white culture" (Hale, 17). In the early 1910s, Hale believes that the modern conception of "Blackness" was born (Hale, 17). Hale offers a possible explanation for the reception of The Hawk's Nest Disaster in

both the media as well as in the penalization of the corporations. If the Committee acts as a reflection of the people, it is possible to assume the Committee, who voted not to punish the corporations, does not represent the miners. If the Committee does not, then, actually represent the miners and their families, the Committee would presumably represent the middle-class to the elite. It seems unlikely that the middle-class or elite class would find acceptable the “New Negro,” who was born in direct contradiction to white culture. Sandy Alexandre furthers this conversation in her own scholarship on Blackness.

Sandy Alexandre, who found inspiration from Grace Hale’s work, wrote *The Properties of Violence* to ask: What space is Black space? Are African Americans self-possessed? Adding to Hale’s work on the “New Negro”, Alexandre claims “Black bodies” have become “foreign” and “strange” because of a constant inability to claim “a place” of their own (Alexandre, 8 and 13).¹ Alexandre is not asking her readers to think of African Americans as vessels physically possessed by whites, she is thinking about African American bodies as objects to be witnessed; i.e. spectacles of *otherness*. The bodies are not necessarily physically possessed as in pre-Civil War slavery. Black bodies are more controlled by those who create and maintain social infrastructure (an “idea,” not a physical structure). There is a social violence that Rukeyser is speaking to. Hartman, then, helps to clarify such violence in Rukeyser’s work and both Hartman and Rukeyser bring attention to slow violence. The violence enacted against African Americans is spectacular (in that it is visible and performative) and slow, and both Alexandre and Rukeyser are clearly influenced by the presence of spectacular violence and slow violence in their

¹ Just as Hale claims African Americans in the South had to construct new conceptions of connectedness under the “New Negro” title.

respective works. Another theorist to speak on historical anti-Black violence, and also look at spectacle, is Saidiya Hartman.

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman begins by speculating on two spectating groups: “voyeurs” and “witnesses” (Hartman, 3). For Hartman, “fungible” Black bodies are on hyper-display.² The witnesses, voyeurs, and/or spectators force Black bodies to perform their own humanity for the enjoyment of the white crowd. In this context, African American slaves, with so little (if any) autonomy, cannot act on their own authority during the periods of slavery due to a rightful fear of punishment.³ The ramifications of anti-Black violence in the United States hindered the feelings of autonomy and self-possession in the Black community and may *still* be imposing on the will of African Americans in the early 1930s. Rukeyser uses her authority as author to add a lens into this violence throughout her work. Most importantly, both Hartman and Rukeyser speak to the concept of the spectacle while also invoking the concepts of slow violence. Spectacle is an important concept that both authors utilize in their works, mainly because the art of violence is something communally reinforceable only if it is seen. As such, both authors write to the importance of the spectacle because it aids in the power white men had over African American families. An important work to bring in for further discussion on this

² Hartman defines “fungible” as: “Exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others” (Hartman, 19). Hartman then goes on to explain her theory of “fungibility: Put differently, the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings ideas desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion. Thus, while the beaten and mutilated body presumably establishes the brute materiality of existence, the materiality of suffering regularly eludes (re)cognition by virtue of the body's being replaced by other signs of value, as well as other bodies (Hartman, 21).

³ A small note: many slaves did defy their masters and act of their own accord. However, it was very dangerous to do so in public situations. One of the grandest forms of resistance from this degrading hypervisibility is that of “opacity”; or the “right to obscurity” (Hartman, 36)

performative experience of the African American is Kariad Brown, who studies the history of African Americans in coal towns.

Karida Brown's *Gone Home: Race and Roots in Appalachia* explores and speaks to dispossession and blackness while providing necessary scholarship on the stories of African Americans living and working in coal towns. One of Brown's main contributions to this thesis on Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* comes from the testimony she focuses on. Brown, like Rukeyser, focuses on witness reports. Brown insists that one of the characteristic necessities of African American survival during and after the period of slavery is improvisation, or the ability to *perform and adapt*:

This black diaspora has invented a repertoire of...traditions to archive home—the place from which they came...through the long durée of black migration in America. [D]ispossession and dislocation is inherent to mass movement of the black body...In this way, for...African American people, home is always an elusive concept. The...alienation from a physical place of origin...stirs in our souls a will of autopoiesis—a...drive for self-making. This is the improvisation of blackness (Brown, 186).

The “improvisation of blackness” is, as Rukeyser, Hale, Alexandre, and Hartman have lightly touched upon, a constant power struggle between the “will of the [white] people” and the Black community (Rukeyser, 73). Brown says African Americans must adapt to survive; the individuals must perform to ensure the community's survival. This brings back the question on the spectator and African American agency in Rukeyser's text. Rukeyser's work acts in the form of “witness” for a reason. Rukeyser is providing a lens through which an audience can read the testimonies, and her poetry form allows her to do so without changing *what* the testimonies mean. Rukeyser does so as to not force further improvisation from the African Americans she writes about. She does not want to further spectacularize the violence against the African Americans, but she does want to frame the violence *as* violence. Though, the question remains: is Rukeyser aiding or further victimizing the African American community?

Koritha Mitchell's *Living With Lynching: African American Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1880-1930* connects art, such as Rukeyser's poetry, to the topic of anti-Black violence in the United States. Much of Mitchell's work speaks to how art can further victimize communities, a timely question and concern for a project such as Rukeyser's. The gaze and construction of the white audience and actor is what initially structured American communities.⁴ This is imperative to note because this knowledge of audience and actor interplay is crucial to understanding *The Book of the Dead*. For instance, I believe this knowledge of white social construction is one of the reasons Muriel Rukeyser chose not to include Nancy Naumburg's photographs, even though the two had planned to put their work side-by-side. Mitchell and Hartman both warn that there are common risks when photographing scenes of violence, even though the photographs were, by all accounts, of building infrastructures instead of victims. The photographs taken by Naumburg, as Mitchell says, can perform the violence; but it may be best to say that the photograph is "re-performing" the violence enacted against the victims. For example, if Naumburg were to picture the gravesite where George Robinson was paid "\$55/a head for burying these men in plain pine boxes" by Rinehart & Dennis according to Rukeyser's poem "The Cornfield", would that not be performative as an element of Rukeyser's illustration (Rukeyser, 95)? Also, is taking photographs of a location "performing violence" (Mitchell, 6)? Rukeyser uses the testimony of the victimized communities *alongside* the Committee transcripts.

⁴ Mitchell says: "Decades of antilynching activism and testimony from victimized black families did not move the nation's leaders at the last turn of the century, and today they are not the inspiration for the Senate's historic gesture for the majority of lynching scholarship. Instead, white-authored photographs have become the evidence that simply cannot be ignored...we treat images of mutilated bodies as the ultimate evidence of lynching destruction, [thus] reaffirm the authority of the mob. Ultimately, it is because they come from white perpetrator themselves that we have allowed the images to continue to trump testimony from victimized communities...We pretend that they offer an objective view...But the pictures are anything but objective...The photographs did not simply document violence; they very much perform(ed) it" (Mitchell, 6).

I believe she is telling a story (i.e. performing), but that there are layers to the performance. These violences; anti-Black, environmental, and labor, work simultaneously against the laborers.

Part II: Environmental and Labor Violence in Rukeyser

Rob Nixon provides a new subset of violence in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. For Nixon, there is another subset of violence which is less frequently named; slow violence. He defines “slow violence” as: “Violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction...dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate[,] explosive[,] and spectacular” (Nixon, 2). Slow violence further engages with the systemic and generational violences in Rukeyser’s text. In this text, Rukeyser is clearly speaking to generational wealth not being possible for African American families. Rukeyser is, by looking at the buildings and bridges in the area, not only speaking about income disparity, but the environmental catastrophe that is generational poverty. This is the work of slow, generational environmental and labor violence against the most vulnerable.

Ronald Walters further articulates throughout “The Impact of Slavery on 20th and 21st Century Black Progress” that few (if any) African American families would have been able to save wages by the 1930s; speaking to Rukeyser’s points on the marriage of anti-Black, environmental, and labor violence. African Americans would not have been given respectable work *over* white families during the depression, and, of course, when Black families did find work, it was work that would be unsafe and most likely unsustainable and seasonal (Walters, 112-128). Not only this, but African Americans in crisis were less likely to be bailed out by the government during times of natural disasters. Whereas Nixon’s slow violence is normally used to describe environmental catastrophes, there is no doubt that there is a continued *group of*

violences which occurs during environmental catastrophes and that *generational poverty is an environmental catastrophe*. African Americans suffer under the imperial regime of the United States, most especially during environmental crises.

Robert Bullard and Beverly Wright in *The Wrong Complexion for Protection : How the Government Response to Disaster Endangers African American Communities*, agree: “The[re are] unequal protection and unequal treatment afforded African Americans...and factors that have made [African Americans] vulnerable...We explor[ed] environmental hazards [which] develop into public health threats and how design factors either mitigate or amplify their effects” (Bullard and Wright, 1-2). The two conclude that “environmental and public health threats from natural and human-made disasters are not randomly distributed” (Bullard and Wright, 2). With regards to continually perpetrated violence, I again turn to Karida Brown, who explains that what makes black persons *other* is their ability to perform and adapt for survival; improvise. This improvisation is a result, I believe, of the combination of violences I have thus far articulated.

The Ethics of White-Washing

Rukeyser’s work acts as witness to spectacular, slow, anti-Black, environmental, and labor violences in Fayette County, West Virginia. In her poem, “Gauley Bridge”, Rukeyser cannot stray far from her privileged position of witness, lest she make further spectacle of the violences. She is the “camera at the crossing.” If Rukeyser were to try and impose herself on the Hawk’s Nest Disaster by inserting herself into the history, even though she is but “a tourist” to the misery, she would further enable the spectacle and perpetuate the violence of the corporations against the victims and their descendents (Rukeyser 68 and 69). Instead, Rukeyser

must *choose* to not make further spectacle out of the violence, though this is difficult to do...in fact, it is impossible to do because Rukeyser is interpreting the violence that they were simply not part of. They are chronicling the history of the dead and thus giving the dead voices they *do not have* because they are dead. However, this calls into question how intention works in the text.

Rukeyser's intention is imperative to understanding the connection between slow violence and spectacle. Rukeyser is blatantly invoking the dead, interpreting their words, and, in many ways, perpetuating the spectacle. However, Rukeyser does so because to not chronicle history is to not criticize past events and thus change future actions. Mitchell is absolutely correct in saying that photographs can perform violence. Poetry invoking the dead certainly does not allow the dead peace. However, I believe that while we must recognize our authority as writers and attempt to not further spectacularize the event, it is imperative to write on instances of violence to criticize not only the physical act of violence, but also to criticize how the history was initially written. Rukeyser's interpretation of George Robinson's testimony, for instance, is an interpretation. The poem *does* further spectacularize the event. The question that remains, again, is "at what cost?" This, I believe, is Rukeyser's true value. Rukeyser is not important to the conversation only because she wrote to the event, she is important because of how she tries to mitigate her impact on the spectacle/violence, and construct a narrative by which she does not personally profit.

This section will further look into Rukeyser's role as witness. I will first speak to the role of the witness, voyeur, and spectator as defined by Saidiya Hartman and Jean-Paul Sartre. I will then complicate these terms and offer my own definition of a spectator as *an agent who acts without action* by looking into two theories on spectatorship I have created for this thesis:

Primary and Secondary Spectatorship. To conclude this section, I will offer my own ideas on how the role of the spectator impacts the reading of Rukeyser's work by close-reading her poems: "The Book of the Dead," "George Robinson: Blues," "Praise of the Committee," and "The Bill."

Part I: Witness, Voyeur, and Spectator

There are more than even three acts of witness in Muriel Rukeyser's poem "Gauley Bridge":

Camera at the crossing sees the city
A street of wooden walls and empty windows,
The doors shut handleless in the empty street,
And the deserted Negro standing on the corner.
The little boy runs with his dog (Rukeyser, 68).

The first witness is the "deserted Negro" whom the reader sees in the street. The second witness is the camera (and the possible person behind the camera). The third witness is the unspoken witnesses on the street.⁵ The fourth witness is the writer, who may or may not be behind the camera. Finally, the fifth witness is the reader. All of these witnesses are, in fact, experiencing different versions of the same scene. Multi-perspectival witnessing is crucial to understanding how the role of the witnesses is important to Rukeyser's critique on violence. However, Saidiya Hartman complicates the act of the witness when she compares the terms "voyeur" and "spectator" in *Scenes of Subjection*; terms I believe are adjacent to "witness".

In beginning with the term "voyeur", Hartman writes that a voyeur is someone "fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance" (Hartman, 2). However, I

⁵ I believe that Rukeyser may be inferring the running boy is a passing witness

take issue with her definition because she uses the conjugation “and,” alone, instead of saying “and possibly.” I do not believe a voyeur is someone who is always both fascinated *and* repelled. I believe the voyeur is someone who is possibly both fascinated and may try to repel the images of violence. However, many can neither resist, nor stop, an image from forming in their mind, though they may try. This inability to truly resist would mean they would attempt to repel the idea, but be thwarted. However, the voyeur is always fascinated by the image because, while fascination generally has a positive connotation, violence attracts the human to view in negative and positive ways the scene before them. For instance, in Rukeyser’s poem, “Absalom,” when the youngest boy asks his mother “Mother, when I die/I want you to have them open me up and/see if that dust killed me” (Rukeyser, 80). The violence of the imagery, opening up the lungs of a dead boy, is what the boy hopes will fascinate a judge and jury into giving his mother a chance at survival through financial compensation. For Saidiya Hartman, there is also a difference between the witness/observer and a spectator. This is, in my interpretation of the text, that the spectator can only exist at a spectacle. One cannot be a spectator to nature, they are a witness or observer of nature, unless nature provides an event for one to spectate (such as a hurricane, in its violence). However, looking at the difference between spectator and voyeur is a bit more complex, and I rely more thoroughly on Jean Paul Sartre to better explain.

The spectator may also serve as an example of Sartre’s voyeur. In a description of human existence in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, he describes humans as existing as true subjects only when they are engrossed in the actions of others, without being directly observed themselves (Sartre, xi). This stipulates that the spectators are simply people who watch actions taking place, similarly to the voyeurs who are (in my furthering of Hartman’s definition) “fascinated with and [possibly] repelled by (and, thus, may try to *repel*) exhibitions of terror and

sufferance.” Sartre describes voyeurs as observant beings, following the actions of others through a metaphorical keyhole, treating those they are observing as objects, and thus granting a particular type of power to the voyeur. For historical purposes, the “voyeur” is understood as the spectator who is engrossed in the actions of others, so the voyeur and spectator are, in fact, one in the same. However, the voyeur can exist outside that of a spectacle, so, possibly, a spectator becomes a witness or voyeur once the spectacle is over and the memory is the only “scene” the now-dubbed “witness” can rely on. The observed/victims are classified as historical actors, who are rendered as objects due to the observational and judgmental qualities of the spectator. The inherent separation of the victim from the spectator is vastly important because it is only in artwork that the victim can reclaim their own image as the main actor. The role of the actor and spectator cannot exist outside of the spectacle within this theory of spectatorship.

I will first start with looking at the role of spectatorship for a few historiographical reasons: 1) Spectatorship is a convoluted topic because spectatorship proffers an apparent contradiction. The spectator is an agent who *acts without action*; the spectator exerts power through presence alone, calling into question heretofore accepted definitions of the historical agent.⁶ The spectator is the one who engages in an interaction without direct interference; the one who exercises without interactive action, through presence alone. 2) The spectator acts with the mob and exerts power over an action without the necessity for speech or individual action. Proximity is relevant to understanding the politics of spectatorship. For example, in “George Robinson: Blues,” Rukeyser uses Robinson’s memory of a spectacle to act as witness to the labor injustices against black men. More specifically, when Robinson is quoted saying, “When a man said I feel poorly, for any reason, any weakness/or such,/letting up when he couldn’t keep going

⁶ This is my definition of Spectator.

barely,/the Cap and company come and run him off the job surely” (Rukeyser, 85). In this instance, all three terms (voyeur, witness, and spectator) act together. Robinson, being present at this event, meant he *was* a spectator, *is* a witness, and *was/is* a voyeur because he was “fascinated” enough to remember the event and continue watching, but he was also possibly repelled by the memory. I believe he was repelled based on my interpretation of the line “letting up when he couldn’t keep going barely” being one of sympathy.⁷

Someone who witnesses an event, first-hand, has a very different experience than someone who may see the act in a photograph. This belief stems from my research which shows the ever-changing role of that which acts without action; i.e. the spectator. Leveling spectatorship clarifies the historical importance of violence in acts of marginalization and *othering*. There are different levels of spectatorship which occur within the anti-Black, environmental, and labor violences. For instance, proximity plays an important role in violence. One who is closer to a fire, for instance, has a different sensory experience than someone further away due to smoke level, heat, and of course, smell. This does not negate the existence of violence in different proximities, but there is a difference in the experience. The role of the spectator is ever-changing because they become more and more attuned with the actions in the spectacle the longer they act as a spectator. For much of the 1930s and before, as evidenced multiple times throughout this paper, it was white persons who acted as spectators to most of the violences.

⁷ I believe that the “spectator” is a time-conditional term, but I am also aware that to continue to speak to spectatorship, voyeurism, and witnessing, I will first need to understand the role of authority I am trying to claim as a spectator to this violence as a non-racially marginalized person. I believe that I am in the same position of Moore and Rukeyser. I do not wish to use the Hawk’s Nest Disaster isaster to reinforce a savior narrative. I am not looking to desecrate the dead who did not ask me to speak for them. I believe that there is an important story to tell within the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel disaster, but I am doing so from a position of removal because I cannot act as witness or spectator to the events that occurred during the 30s; maybe more importantly, even Rukeyser’s work is a re-telling. Just as there are levels to the Hawk’s Nest Disaster story, there are levels to spectatorship.

White spectators are agents whose very presence at the “exhibitions of terror and sufferance” support the actions of the community when they do not act in defiance of their spectator role. These white spectators, for the purposes of clarity, are the fuel to fire for every lynch mob and act of egregious violence incurred against the black population in Fayette County, West Virginia. Beyond the more outwardly violent actions, it is a labor violence to not unionize and force the corporation to better pay the black wage earners during the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel building project. White wage earners (though labor violence victims in their own right) participated in slow violence tactics. Anti-Black violences, such as the scene described by Moore between Bernard Jones and Dr. Cherniack, are blatant cross burnings to scare black miners from staying in the town, among other activities. The townspeople helped to “kill[...] a lot of blacks...[erase blacks] from Hawk’s Nest” and mocked the starving black population by offering “crow” to eat when black people begged for food (Rukeyser, 19-20 and 29). These messages of communal expectation can only make sense when the messages and acts of violence are made public; have witnesses and spectators. If there are no spectators to judge, then duelists are performers in an empty theatre, and the lynch mobs would consist of two psychically active men—one to hold the victim while the second tied the noose—in an empty act of murder without communal payoff or acceptance. The active men, like the spectators looking upon the action, are all voyeurs. Traditionally, the spectators are categorized as separate from the two physically active men, though I do believe they are just as culpable. For this, I offer two definitions and some close-reading examples of spectatorship and anti-Black violence within Rukeyser’s work.

Part II: Primary Spectatorship

I define “primary spectatorship” as a form of spectatorship in which the witness must be in close enough physical proximity to act as a physical witness and spectator to an event. In

Rukeyser, one such example can be seen in “The Doctors.” Mr. Griswold, a lawyer, and Dr. Goldwater, who is on trial as a doctor and witness to the effects of silica on miners in Fayette County, West Virginia during the 30s, are going back and forth about the findings of those who died from dangerous silica inhalation during the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel Disaster. Within Rukeyser’s interpretation of the conversation:

-Did you make an examination of those sets of lungs?

-I did.

-I wish you would tell the jury whether or not those lungs

Were silicotic.

-We object.

-Objection overruled.

-They were (Rukeyser, 93).

In this example, Rukeyser is using a primary spectator from the event to give testimony. The spectacle, in question, was looking, again, at the silicotic lungs which belong to a (now) dead man. In this example, Dr. Goldwater did not, of course, give the man silicosis, so he is not a primary agent who “acted”. However, Dr. Goldwater witnessed the spectacle (i.e. was *inactive*) and he acted as a participant of three grander forms of violence: anti-Black violence, environmental violence (slow violence), and, of course, labor violence. By this, I mean that the doctor—who knew enough to say at the time of the first hospital visit, “I warned many of them[, the workers,] of the dust hazard and advised them that continued work under these conditions would result in serious lung disease”—was a primary spectator to the violence he helped perpetuate (Rukeyser, 91). I say this because the spectators are those who give weight to acts of offense or criminality (by the corporation, in this instance) with their spectatorship and lack of action, even if the action is that of slow violence. It is on behalf of the power of primary spectators that the actors concerned in any historical event can be compelled to play their part on

the historical stage. Those who primarily spectated are, in my mind, guilty of acting without action when they witnessed, but did not stop, the men forced to drill into 90-99% pure silica, dry.

For this, I turn to Rukeyser's "The Bill":

 THAT prevention is: wet drilling, ventilation,
 respirators, vacuum drills.

Disregard: utter. Dust: collected. Visibility: low...

A fellow could drill three holes dry for one hole wet.

They went so fast they didn't square at the top (Rukeyser, 114).

The text above is important because it further implicates the spectators. The spectators, such as the doctors and corporations, knew that the drilling was going too quickly and that the miners were working in deadly environments. On the very next page of "The Bill", Rukeyser implies the same: the doctors, just as the corporation who funded the Hawk's Nest tunnel mining, knew "THAT the Bureau of Mines has warned [against this type of mining] for twenty years" (Rukeyser, 114). This is all to say that there is no difference between a primary spectator and an actor or agent of spectacle (one who perpetuates the violence), in my mind, when it comes to guilt of association and action. Those who perform and those who only spectate upon are guilty of the perpetuation of violence. To clarify once more: primary spectators are those who witness an event in real-time and real-distance. It is not someone who views a photo or video after an event has taken place, such as, say, Mr. Griswold the lawyer. The Doctor was a primary spectator.⁸ For this reason, I, for instance, could not be a primary spectator to the events that occurred in the 30s simply because I have read Rukeyser. By reading Rukeyser, I am participating as a secondary spectator.

⁸ I will explain how the Doctor can act as a "secondary spectator," too, in my next part.

Part III: Secondary Spectatorship

“Secondary spectatorship” is where most research for historical and journalistic rests. Secondary spectatorship, like primary spectatorship, is also bent upon a physical distance demarcation, and reliant on the spectator being a witness outside of “real-time” and “real-space”. In secondary incidences, information is coming from a different level of distance than primary. In primary spectatorship, the overall role of the primary spectator is mostly unchanging. They witness, actively or passively, an event or spectacle (I agree with Hartman on that portion of her definition). The primary spectators *act*, even in moments of inaction, by their very participation. Secondary spectatorship is more complicated because of time and distance. For example, “the Congressmen are restless” but they cannot participate as primary spectators to the events in the Hawk’s Nest Disaster because they are working on a bill after the fact, and thus could not have participated or been spectators to events in real-time. The documents they look at and the witnesses they speak to perpetuate secondary spectatorship; a reperformance of the violence, but not the initial violence. Both of these examples are reliant on information not gathered by their witness of the actual event in question. Secondary spectators are able to claim removal (and thus removal from responsibility) from the action even as they are the ones who try to reconstruct the events for the modern audiences of the time (such as what Rukeyser tries to do with *The Book of the Dead*). These spectators are reliant on media, itself, to accurately portray “true” events.⁹

Secondary spectatorship provides a lens to further understand how events of the past can affect the present. This form of spectatorship is what historians rely so heavily on. An example of such, again, is the photograph of the lungs from “The Doctors.” The photograph/X-ray is a

⁹ The media can be written, photographed, filmed, etc.

document from the 30s, which, it can be argued, the doctor and patient were originally primary spectators to. Mr. Griswold was not privy to this photo at the time of the spectacular reveal. The Congressmen are secondary spectators due to the removal from the event over distance and time. By re-articulating such an event using the photo representation, the spectator does not need to be physically present at the event to try and parse out as clear an idea as possible of what occurred. However, as with most photographs, there is a problem when using this method of memory because it is typically using a singular perspective point. This problem is something Mitchell points out about photographs of lynchings: “The photographs did not simply document violence; they very much perform(ed) it,” (Mitchell, 6). This, Mitchell articulates, is dangerous because relying on only the photograph can get in the way of marginalized and victimized communities speaking their own truth. Pictures are, as Mitchell rightly points out, “anything but objective” (Mitchell, 6). It is here that I believe Rukeyser separates herself from the definition of spectator and voyeur. Rukeyser is acting as a witness because she is offering up her interpretation of the testimonies on the spectacle. She utilized secondary spectatorship when she went through primary images and documentation, but she is not *still* within the defined parameters of the spectacle now that she is separate from the latter half of the definition of spectator I have provided: an agent who *acts without action*. Rukeyser has acted, and she is outside the action of the spectacle. However, she makes her reader confront their own position to the spectacle of violence as a witness. I will now close-read sections of four of Rukeyser’s poems: “The Book of the Dead,” “George Robinson: Blues,” “Praise of the Committee,” and “The Bill.”

Part IV: Close-Readings

“The Book of the Dead” is not directed towards any one place. The poem, itself, is a map which spans from London to California, hitting pit-stops at places like Nevada and Spain. I find

this an important conversational starting piece because it so impactfully and rightfully directs the reader's attention to something narratively crucial in a text which seeks to undermine the corporate mentality of America: community. For corporations to persist and exist, there has to be a following large enough for them to survive. The "improvisation" of blackness needs a community to survive such a lonely and dispossessed existence. Rukeyser, using characters throughout her book (and not just "The Book of the Dead"), redirects the reader to remember that those who are affected by silicosis are not only those who are subject to impending death, such as Arthur from her poem "Arthur Peyton". However, those who do "glow in their graves" should act as a beacon of warning to those who believe that corporations exist to *help* blue collar workers (black and white alike) (Rukeyser, 121). However, the only direct action on the part of the corporation is that of anti-Black, labor, and environmental violence. These workers, "belligerents who know the world," are not just easily manipulated by corporations, these workers are systemically culled by corporate greed in enraging acts of violence under the guise of fabricated "community." This "community" is a ruse in Fayette County. For instance, in Rukeyser's re-telling of the 1984 oral history of the disaster between victim Bernard Jones and occupational health specialist Dr. Martin Cheriack:

The merchants and professionals wrote an open letter denouncing the media for printing "propaganda" about their town, decrying the "undesirables, mainly Negroes" who had taken up residence there...

"Who it was, I don't know," said Bernard, "but somebody in Gauley Bridge went across the river in Vanetta, and they put a big cross up there on the hillside and wrapped it with rags and soaked it with gasoline and set it on fire. Well, these black people, when they seen that cross burning, that scared them. And the next morning one group after another came down that railroad track headed for the bus station, going back home to the South (Rukeyser, 33).

African Americans who have claimed their freedom from the shackles of chattel slavery are being systematically killed by the corporations (alongside whites), and they are also being

attacked by white people in the town they reside in. Thus, as Alexandre might argue, African Americans cannot claim the town as their own. Rukeyser is using *The Book of the Dead* as a lens into this slow violence. Rukeyser also speaks to this in her poem, “George Robinson: Blues.” In a post-slavery world, African American men (such as George Robinson) were forced to work in dangerous environments. Robinson would come from the mines covered in deadly silica powder:

As dark as I am, when I could out at morning after the
tunnel at night
With a which men, nobody could have told which man was
white.

The dust had covered us both and the dust was white (Rukeyser, 87).

In coupling this excerpt with Alexandre’s points above, Rukeyser is clearly commenting on the lack of safety for African Americans trying to attain economic security. African Americans were not safe, even if they only “stood around” as George Robinson says in Rukeyser’s “George Robinson: Blues”: “Gauley Bridge is a good town for Negroes,/they let us stand around, they let us stand” (Rukeyser, 85). Robinson is interpreted as saying this even though the townspeople helped to “kill[...] a lot of blacks... from Hawk’s Nest” and mocked the starving Black population by offering “crow” to eat when Black people begged for food (Rukeyser, 19-20 and 29). While racism and discrimination in the post-slavery world certainly still exists, the corporations exacerbated race hatred by not paying a livable wage to the workers.

These corporations *allow* the miners to have a community as long as the miners sit in generational poverty or die in the frozen winters (Rukeyser, 120). As soon as the communities fight back as a community, however, it becomes “inadvisable to keep a community of dying persons intact” because the community becomes able to speak as one voice (Rukeyser, 75). The community these dying people believe they have is short-term. It is a community of the dead and

broken, hence the title of the book and the multiple allusions to “cells” and “controlled and damned” people (Rukeyser, 121 and 119). This community of the dead is written off before it begins and it most heavily impacted, in this instance, the black workers. If not silicosis, then the tunnels will awash themselves in blood when the mines collapse because “the[workers] went so fast [under the insistence of the corporation that] they didn’t square at the top” against basic federal safety guidelines which require a “squared top” for proper ventilation (Rukeyser, 114). “The disease,” it seems, is not just silicosis, it is a capitalist-driven society which looks to benefit and protect corporation investments instead of protecting the actual employees of the corporations who work in such dangerous environments. In fact, Rukeyser makes it a point to connect the workers to nature: “Seasons and maps coming where this road comes/into a landscape mirrored in these men” and “but planted in our flesh these valleys stand” (Rukeyser, 117 and 120). Rukeyser seems to be saying that the coal miners and nature are connected due to both nature’s and the poor miner’s continued oppression, but she asks the workers to fight back, together, against these violences thrust upon them.

Rukeyser wrote this piece as a call-to-action (i.e. “strikers...fight on all new frontiers”) as much as she wrote the rest of the collection to act as witness (Rukeyser, 122). For instance, after her first asterisk on page 119 and before her second on page 121, the poem’s middle section: “you young, you who finishing the poem/wish new perfection and begin to make;/you men of fact, measure our times” again directly asks in second-person direct narrative that the reader change the ending of the poem, and prevent corporations from being able to simply wipe away human existence without retribution (Rukeyser, 121). Rukeyser is asking for simple solutions. While, ultimately, protest may be the only way to prevent these men from the “farm and starve” future Rukeyser sees in their present, she is really asking for future generations to use their best

tool: “Defense is sight” (Rukeyser, 122). Her poem, “The Book of the Dead”, looks to shed light on the travesties occurring in small-town America where corporations can act without supervision. Rukeyser, though, cannot bring these people back from the dead. As she says, these men who died, “their eyes water and rust away,” are unable to provide any sort of foresight to those after them, i.e. their children (Rukeyser, 122). This call-to-action is aimed at the next generation who can prevent rather than react through proper unionization, legislative action, and protest. The Anita Jones characters, by the virtue of getting away, are the result of this call-to-action, even if it is slow going. However, the collection of poems also calls to attention an issue Hale brings up previously.

Hale’s work clarifies an issue within Rukeyser’s text. For example, in the poem “Praise of the Committee”, Rukeyser draws special attention to how the Committee, “a true reflection of the will of the people,” remembers the witnesses called in for special council. So documented:

Here are Mrs. Jones, three lost sons, husband sick
Mrs. Leek, cook for the bus cafeteria,
the men: George Robinson, leader and voice,
four other Negroes (three drills, one camp-boy)
Blakenship, the thing friendly man, Peyton the engineer,
Juanita absent, the one outsider member (Rukeyser, 73)

Jones, Leek, Robinson, Blakenship, Peyton, and Juanita are all called by name. George Robinson is the one Black man who is called by his name, whereas the “four other Negroes” are not given such treatment. Other than this, Mrs. Jones’ dead sons and sick husband (who is as good as dead with acute silicosis) are the only ones with no ascribed name in this section of the poem. This is important because the Black men are not written as sick, nor dying. If the Committee merely wanted to speed up the process of naming the witnesses, they could have grouped many of the

witnesses together, yet they did so with only the group of “dead” or “Black” persons. Hale offers a possible explanation for this oversight. If the Committee acts as a reflection of the people, it is possible to assume the Committee does not actually represent the miners and their families; it is more than likely the Committee represents the middle-class to the elite. It seems unlikely that the middle-class or elite class would find acceptable the “New Negro” which was born in direct contradiction to white culture. Rukeyser’s collection, written in response to the lack of proper judgement against the murderous corporations, acts as witness to this fact.

Conclusion

Rob Nixon does not believe slow violence is spectacular, and I both disagree and agree. Slow violence may not seem spectacular when looked at from a far distance or in a short amount of time, but slow violence can be spectacular.¹⁰ I say this not merely to criticize Nixon, but more so because I believe that framing many of the violences in *The Book of the Dead* as acts of slow violence, as well as spectacular acts of violence, aids in understanding Rukeyser’s point about witness. For instance, the name “The Hawk’s Nest Disaster” implies that the violence was rapid, but silicosis can spread without notice for ten years (Rukeyser, 91). Witnessing the event also occurs outside of the currently accepted parameters of “spectacle” because the term implies a “singular event.” However, individual events can be tied into a single result of spectacular violence which we can witness.

¹⁰ For example, Moore tied the names of all known 789 victims of acute silicosis together between pages fifty-two and fifty-nine of the *Forward*. Taken individually, these numbers are no spectacle, but when looked as a group, the numbers are spectacular.

The Book of the Dead, then, establishes itself within all three frameworks of violence I have spoken to thus far: environmental, labor, and, of course, racial (anti-Black) violence. *The Book of the Dead* situates itself within the existing frameworks set up by Saidiya Hartman and Jean-Paul Sartre, but also forces us to reevaluate the previously accepted definitions of “witness”, “voyeur”, and, of course, “spectator.” Finally, racialized violence is relevant to the consideration of environmental disasters because these workers are at the mercy of their surroundings. These primarily black miners are at the mercy of their corporate masters. The Hawk’s Nest Tunnel Disaster was not just a single instance of indiscriminate violence upon the African American community. The Hawk’s Nest Tunnel Disaster was an act of spectacular violence. It serves as another example, in a chain of examples, of systemic, intentional, and repeatable violence. This has been determined by weaving together the three violences I have outlined here (racial, environmental, and labor).

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