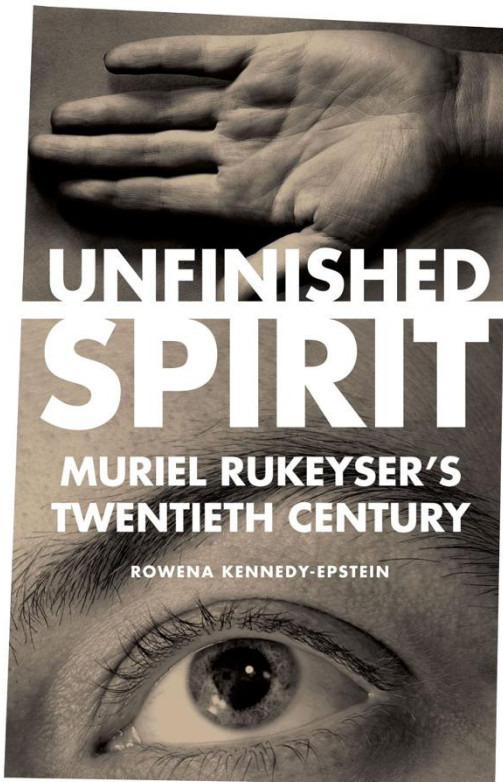


CONTENTS

<i>Unfinished Spirit: Muriel Rukeyser's Twentieth Century</i> , by Rowena Kennedy-Epstein Reviewed by Louise Kertesz	1
Rukeyser at Vassar Trudi Witonsky	3
Rukeyser News	7
Rukeyser Bibliography 2020–23	8
A Note from Bill Rukeyser	11



***Unfinished Spirit: Muriel Rukeyser's Twentieth Century* by Rowena Kennedy-Epstein**

Cornell University Press, 2022

Reviewed by Louise Kertesz

*keep the literary scholars out
and stick to the original writing*
—Charles Simic

So was headed the introduction to the Pitt Poetry Series Anthology *American Poetry Now*, published in 2007. There's that familiar sniff of dismissal of the literary scholar's labors. After all, it's "the original writing" that readers come for.

But the fact is that in recent years, literary scholars dedicatedly mining archives have made discoveries of immense relevance to women poets' published "original writing," as well as brought to light much of their original writing we had no idea existed.

Rowena Kennedy-Epstein's *Unfinished Spirit, Muriel Rukeyser's Twentieth Century*, is itself a work of bold originality and personal, passionate scholarship. It's fitting that Rukeyser's work modeled those qualities when critics were dismissing them as inappropriate, even offensive in a woman writer. In her acknowledgments, Kennedy-Epstein professes the deep connection she has forged with her subject: "Writing about Rukeyser has helped me think through our political, humanitarian, and environmental crises and to remain, as she models, a 'vulgar optimist.'"

Kennedy-Epstein offers readers a cache of Rukeyser's original writing, long buried in several archives as a result of the gendered, political, and aesthetic dismissals and rejections of Cold War publishing. Knowledge

of those unfinished manuscripts and abandoned projects—and the reasons therefor—is essential to understanding the work of a major poet of the last century, whose influence on generations of feminist and activist poets is continually acknowledged.

Rukeyser’s archival writing also provides an invaluable perspective on our times and a guide to moving forward (particularly in our era of revived book banning) with her characteristic belief in possibility, in process and potential. Her life and work are an example as we try to keep our increasingly distracted lives from being “shredded,” one focus from another. Her entire oeuvre is of a piece, based on the work of the imagination to hold in awareness our never-ending wars and their refugees; “the Brave, setting up signals across vast distances,” who continue to pave the way in art, science, politics, exploration; the indigenous ways of seeing and living; the despised and forgotten among us; and, in Kennedy-Epstein’s words, “a radical future” where bodies—especially women’s bodies—“can exceed their boundaries and desire whoever they want.”

Kennedy-Epstein’s description of finding the manuscript of *Savage Coast*, Rukeyser’s account of witnessing the outbreak of the Spanish Civil war just as she arrived in Spain, sets the tone of the book—that of excited discovery as the fruit of meticulous, personally engaged archival search. Rukeyser’s story introduces Otto Boch, the antifascist German athlete she fell in love with, who was to become a powerful, recurrent symbol in her work of the fight for freedom and against all forms of tyranny.

Kennedy-Epstein frankly describes her shock at never having heard of Rukeyser, despite moving to Barcelona “to study the legacy of the Spanish Civil War on contemporary anarchist movements.” Her prose bristles with contained outrage: “she was in no canon that I ever encountered in classrooms, though I was taught Orwell and Hemingway and Auden.” In the book’s last fiery passages, she’s not afraid to characterize as “infuriating” the attitudes that for years kept Rukeyser’s work invisible.

But she exults that with the passage of time and the loosening of gendered strongholds, “a woman would encounter another woman’s work and have the authority to deem it valuable.” That took almost three quarters of a century, but as Kennedy-Epstein walked into Rukeyser’s archive and found the manuscript of *Savage Coast*, she thought “yes, this is exactly what I’ve been looking for.”

The archives reveal that Rukeyser’s manuscript was rejected by a reviewer (ironically, her mentor), because he just didn’t get it, even though Rukeyser’s “text defies and remakes the artistic, political, and gendered categories of twentieth-century modernism.” Kennedy-Epstein’s account treats us to the thrilling somatic experience of a twenty-first century literary scholar discovering in a box marked Misc. a manuscript that “made my hands clammy as I began, hunched over the long desk under the ugly lights. I read the entire thing right there.”

Reading *Unfinished Spirit* I am reminded of a reviewer’s comment on Rukeyser’s first book, *Theory of Flight*, which won the Yale Younger Poets prize. “When you hold this book in your hand, you hold a living thing.”

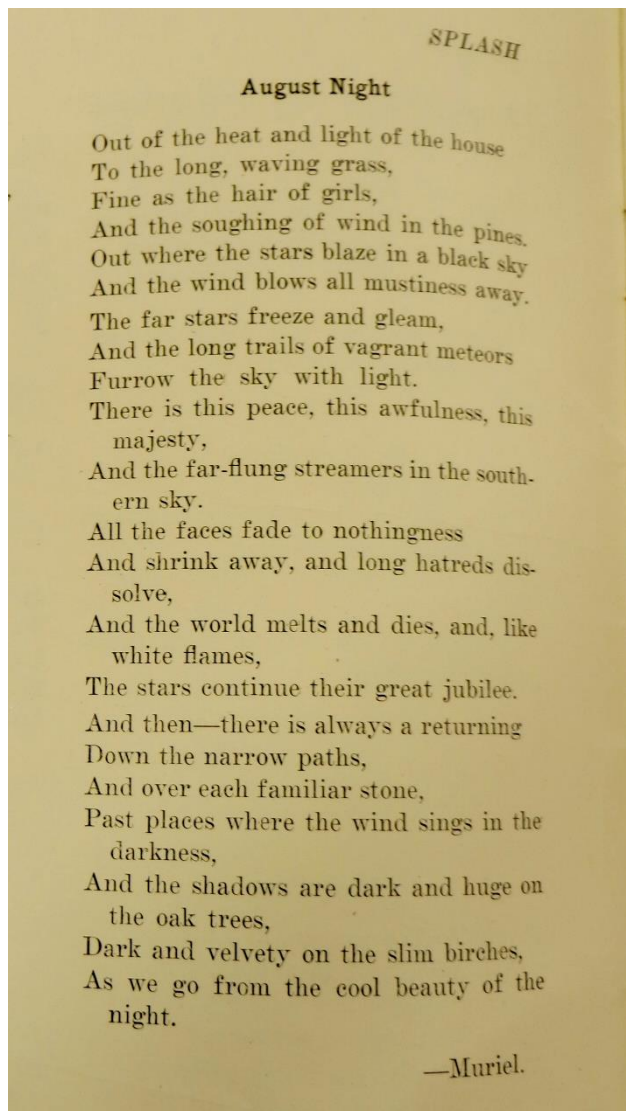
Continued on page 5

Archival Finds: Muriel Rukeyser at Vassar

Trudi Witonsky

For those interested in Muriel Rukeyser's early development as a writer, the archive of Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, offers many treasures. One discovery I made when visiting Vassar last summer is *Walden Splash*, the magazine from Walden summer camp in Maine, which Rukeyser attended for several summers as a young woman. Begun in 1916 with land purchased by Blanche Hirsch and Clara Altschul, the camp promoted the Transcendentalist values of its founders, who were also committed to the Ethical Culture Movement, encouraging independent thought, respect for and support of others, honesty, and making one's best effort. While most campers at the time were from well-off Jewish families, the nearly two-month-long camp experience did not emphasize religion. Instead, it promoted personal development through physical activities such as hiking (with overnight excursions), swimming, rowing, team sports, crafts, and the arts including singing and dramatic presentations by each "bunk." (I culled information about

Walden Camp from the [Campwalden website](#) and Frances Brent's recollections of visiting the Camp in the 1960s, [Walden, Revisited](#).)



August Night, Walden Splash 1928

Vassar has copies of the yearbook from 1927–30 (as well as an anniversary edition from 1935), and we see Rukeyser transition from entertainment editor at age thirteen, to editor in chief by 1929 and 1930 when she was fifteen and sixteen years old. She contributed numerous poems, and what stands out is her enjoyment of baseball -- there are at least four poems relating to this! But another thing that strikes me is the variety of her influences including Arthur Guiterman, Walter de la Mare, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Alfred Noyes; Robert Louis Stevenson; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; Elinor Wylie—and others we might infer from subject matter and phrasing like Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot. We see Rukeyser trying out different styles with generally humorous content on camp life and sports. In contrast are her nature poems, which testify to her appreciation of natural beauty and hint at later themes of process and perspective.

4

The Waldenite

(With apologies to A. Noyes)

The banners were brightly streaming up-
 on the summer breeze,
 The sun was a steaming vessel settling
 above the trees,
 Pouring down on the bare and brown
 shoulders and arms and knees,
 And the Waldenite came sliding—
 Sliding—Sliding—
 The Waldenite came sliding, up to the
 old home plate.

She clattered over the pebbles up to the
 white first base,
 And the short threw the baseball over the
 sacred and honored place,
 And the runner hurried onward in the
 heat of the mad race,
 The runner hastened onward,
 Onward—Onward—

The runner hastened onward, towards
 distant second base.

The fielder chased the baseball, and fast-
 er than they reckoned,
 Threw to the waiting Waldenite who
 stood at the base called second,
 But the runner hurried faster, to distant
 Third which beckoned,

The runner sped on faster—
 Faster—Faster—

he runner sped on faster to the white
 goal that beckoned.

The second baseman threw the ball high
 —but clean and neat,
 But the eager baseman waiting there for-
 got to pick up her feet,
 And the ball went hurtling onward the
 length of a city street,
 And the Waldenite came sliding—
 Sliding—Sliding—

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SPLASH

The Waldenite came sliding up to the
 old home plate.

And still they tell when the banners are
 streaming on the breeze,

And the sun is a steaming vessel settling
 above the trees,

Pouring down on the bare and brown
 shoulders and arms and knees,

How the Waldenite came sliding—
 Sliding—Sliding—

The Waldenite came sliding up to the
 old home plate.

—Muriel.

Song

Apologies to W. S.

The camper sews each tiny strip,
 The work to her's no song,
 For campers sew while councilors rip,
 Thus runs the world along.

—Lou.

Meteors—

Racing—shooting.

Streaking 'cross the sky—

Rare, dazzling,

Dragging a trail of dust—

Star dust—gold, soft,

Disappearing in the darkness.

Meteors—

—Carol Fraenkel.

Waldenite, Walden Splash 1928

Continued from page 2

And, curiously, I also hear Rukeyser’s poem “Then”:

When I am dead, even then,
I will still love you, I will wait in these poems,
...
I will still be making poems for you
out of silence;
silence will be falling into that silence,
it is building music.

Indeed, Rukeyser’s original unpublished work has been waiting for K-E and the “community of scholars” mining the silence of her archives, who are generously cited in the introduction. Reading her poems in light of these scholars’ revelatory findings, the music builds to a wonderful crescendo.

K-E begins her study by detailing the unfinished and rejected works in the archives as examples of the “waste” produced by prejudiced (one can’t but think also ignorant) judges of women’s writing. How could they have failed to recognize that “theoretically ambitious, multigenre, sometimes collaborative, these texts continued the radical avant-garde project of modernism and traced a polyphonic American tradition that challenged an increasingly hegemonic Cold War culture”?

These writings present an “alternative vision of the twentieth century.” What a waste that those of us born in and living through that century did not have them to guide us both in our studies and our lives! I think how enlightening it would have been for women like me, of last century’s postwar Silent Generation—followed by those sunny California conservative Reagan years—to have read about the earlier collaboration between Rukeyser and Berenice Abbott during the Cold War. The two “shared a similar goal: to develop new methods for demonstrating the uses of and relationships between the arts and sciences.”

Abbott invented a camera that produced an exceptionally detailed image. K-E explains the collaborators believed the camera “produces a photograph that can actually expose to us the ‘essence’ of a thing that we fail to see ordinarily but know to be there” as well as startling correspondences. Who can fail to recognize a vagina in Abbott’s photo of an apple sliced in half, reproduced in K-E’s book? “It’s hard not to read their project as one partly about lesbian desire,” she writes, quoting the social theorist Avery Gordon about “visible invisibility.” Abbott and Rukeyser at one point “had probably been lovers,” K-E notes.

“Today science needs its voice,” Abbott wrote in a letter seeking funding for their proposed book, to be entitled *So Easy to See*. Science needs “the warm human quality of imagination added to its austere and stern disciplines . . . to speak to the people in terms they will understand.” Rukeyser, for her part, had been since the mid-Thirties “already practicing this ‘unity of imagination’ through a series of collaborative projects and multiform experiments,” notably with the photographer Nancy Naumberg in *Book of the Dead* (1938), about miners dying of silicosis in West Virginia, in one of the worst industrial disasters in the US. Incredibly, the book was not published with photos until 2018.

Alas, they were women. A 2014 article by Rebecca Onion in *Slate* is among those that document—surprise!—how women in scientific fields during the Cold War were disparaged, undervalued, and underpaid, discrimination that continued for decades. Kate Zernike in *The Exceptions: Nancy Hopkins, MIT, and the Fight for Women in Science*, published just last year, revisits the groundbreaking public 1996 report—featured in the 2020 documentary *Picture a Scientist*—that showed how MIT marginalized its women scientists. The situation has improved for women in STEM fields. But it is useful to consider the past when the temptation is to think no more progress need be made. When it comes to attitudes toward women who don't fit the mold, Rukeyser's experience illustrates: plus ça change.

As K-E observes, Abbott's and Rukeyser's was "a relationship between two of the twentieth century's most versatile artists that has been, for the most part, relegated to the archives." K-E has retrieved their experience and perspective for us as we seek to move beyond the obstacles of our own time.

It was Rukeyser's study of indigenous culture, following the traces of Franz Boas, called the father of American anthropology, that cultivated her belief in embracing process as the crucial lesson for the individual and the species, although—again—the irony is that her major project in this regard was rejected and left unfinished. As K-E writes, Rukeyser was "the first researcher to begin to collect and catalogue Boas's material history, from Germany to the Pacific Coast, constructing a narrative of his life as well as the lives he recorded," and the materials for her biography now form "an archive inside the larger Boas collection in the American Philosophical Society Library." But in published works showing how Boas's ideas have influenced our own thinking, "Rukeyser herself is not cited as an intellectual or authorial source, only the collection, as if the material aggregated itself."

This after decades of work on the book, including traveling with her son, not quite two years old, to live among and interview the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples on Vancouver Island, more than 50 years after Boas; the loss of a publisher targeted for being a Communist; and failure to obtain funding for the book, "not even from the American Philosophical Society itself, where the Boas papers were stored, because, as Catherine Gander notes, she had an 'unscientific background.'"

But as Rukeyser wrote, "waste. . . is never waste." K-E explains how "Rukeyser's work on Boas and cultural anthropology gave her new ideas to think with: the lives of the obscure and anonymous, the bodily life that has been denigrated in Western culture, that has 'separated ourselves from ourselves'—especially birth, sex, and death." Rukeyser's poems about birth, sex, and motherhood bear the influence of indigenous "artistic and cultural practices which emphasize a 'language of process.'" Always, she defended "dark beginnings" and "most human giving." It is this language and vision—of possibility, process, interconnectedness, that can save us. "The seeds of all things are blessed."

K-E shows how Rukeyser repurposed the ideas of her rejected and unfinished manuscripts into formats including radio programs, films, plays, magazine articles, mystery stories, even a proposed additional chapter of *The Life of Poetry* "while at the same time attempting to preserve her radical vision." In an interview two years before her death in 1980, Rukeyser says, "What I care about in Whitman is the extreme fight to keep my skin together, the extreme contradictions. I don't turn my back. The violence, shamefulness, willfulness are in myself. I wish to make music of them." Hers was

the voice of continual engagement with the ideals and contradictions she encountered as a young woman in Spain.

Rukeyser calls out June Jordan, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde as examples of what K-E identifies as “a prescient vision of an intersectional, bisexual feminist poetics [that] underscores her consistent effort to connect social justice movements for racial and gender equality within American literary and artistic traditions and to show the ways in which those intersections can engender transformative thinking and being not confined by patriarchal nationalism.”

A brief review like this one clearly does not do justice to the myriad ways the original scholarship of *Unfinished Spirit* draws out the connections between Rukeyser’s lifelong discoveries, as documented in the archives, and the development of American modernity. And as K-E writes, Rukeyser’s vast archive is as yet untapped. But reading this book is an introduction to her transformative ideas, to the “emergency” that confronts us amid the “waste and ruins” of our own time, and how engagement “is embodied. . .it is felt and experienced in oneself—it makes you hot, your heart beat fast.”

Rukeyser News

The Muriel Rukeyser Era: Selected Prose, edited by Eric Keenaghan and Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, is now available from Cornell University Press.

This book makes available for the first time a range of Muriel Rukeyser's prose, a rich and diverse archive of political, social, and aesthetic writings. Eric Keenaghan and Rowena Kennedy-Epstein assemble a selection of unpublished and out-of-print texts, demonstrating the diversity, brilliance, and possibilities of mid-twentieth-century women's intellectual life and sociopolitical engagement.

Beyond Ourselves: Contemporary Poets on Muriel Rukeyser, edited by Catherine Gander and Stefania Heim. Forthcoming from West Virginia University Press, 2024.

A timely addition to poetry, poetics, and Muriel Rukeyser studies, this hybrid anthology gathers original critical and creative contributions from some of the most exciting poets writing today, including Daniel Borzutzky, Susan Briante, Ross Gay, Erika Meitner, Philip Metres, Jena Osman, Deborah Paredez, Khadijah Queen, Solmaz Sharif, and Nomi Stone. In lyric and braided essays, scholarly critique, memoir, hybrid investigations, documentary collages, and collaborative poetry, the makers of this book offer radical new perspectives on Rukeyser's work, at the same time exploring the models she provides for our own politically and poetically entangled lives.

Louise Kertesz’s donation of letters, research notes, and interviews is now available to researchers at the Eastern Michigan University Archive (Ypsilanti, MI 38197).

Finding Aid: <https://aspace.emich.edu/repositories/2/resources/979>

Kertesz is the author of *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (Louisiana State University Press, 1980), a pioneering study of Rukeyser’s entire body of work and its critical reception.

Reading Poems with People: A Muriel Rukeyser Reading Group. We’d like to have regular 60-90- minute online programs on selected Rukeyser poems. Facilitators will choose poems and invite two participants with whom to discuss them. The programs will be open to the public. If you are

interested in facilitating one of these programs, please contact us at
<https://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/contact/>

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A Note from Bill Rukeyser on his mother's Christmas star:



MR made this star out of aluminum foil and cardboard in the early '70s when we were in Ottawa. She attached it to a Scandinavian straw ornament from her Ekelöf years. We've had it at the top of every tree since then.

And in response to a recent LA Times article on New York City's Christmas tree industry, Bill remembered the following:

My (single) mother and I lived in a 3rd floor walk up on E 88th (pre-gentrification) between 1st & York and her source of tree was the hardware store on 1st.

For an extra buck (or so) they would nail crossed wood (sounds more like Good Friday than Xmas, but bear with me) to the trunk as a stand. No delivery service, so she would take the heavy end, I (all 7 years of me) hefted the light end and we trudged home through the NYC sludge.

Getting the tree up the stoop and then two more long flights of stairs was a challenge each December. Once the tree was tipped up and decorated, there was no motivation to do anything more. I think that feeling was universal on our block.

How do I know? Because of the next, most memorable, part of the tale.

Remember that the tree was supported by the crossed wood. No modern stand with a tank of water back then. So, our tree and all the others on the block, began to desiccate as soon as they were decorated. Because of the effort of getting them to apartments, no one wanted to remove them right after Xmas. The trees were not considered worthy of removal until their needles turned a rich brown and began to fall.

Then the ritual was to air mail the tree out the window to the sidewalk below.

No city provided “tree-cycling” back then. The equivalent was a free service provided by neighborhood punks. They piled the trees in front of the plumbing supply warehouse on the block and it only took a single match to light the tinder dry bonfire. (Bill Rukeyser)

The secret child walks down the street
of needle-dark December smells.
She walks with wonder everywhere.
Who is that Child? Where is that sweet
face of the songs and silver bells,
The broad red saint, the angelhair?
(from “Christmas Eve” in *The Green Wave*, 1948)

The *Rukeyser Biennial* is produced by the Muriel Rukeyser Living Archive at Eastern Michigan University. Please contact us at <https://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/contact/> for contributions, corrections, or suggestions. We thank Casey Hale for designing this newsletter.