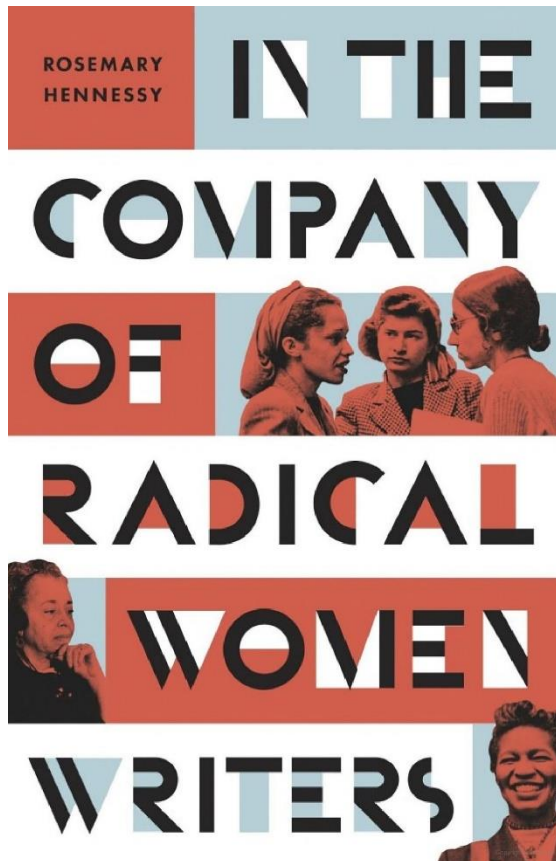


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***In the Company of Radical Women Writers*, by Rosemary Hennessy**

University of Minnesota Press, 2023

Reviewed by Trudi Witonsky

In the Company of Radical Women Writers is a compelling and insightful exploration of undervalued activist women writers in the 1930s. In this groundbreaking work, Rosemary Hennessy expertly integrates original archival research, Marxist Feminist theory, cultural studies, contemporary scholarship on each writer, historical analysis, and personal reflection. This synthetic approach sheds light on the ways these women shaped the 1930s Left, and the inclusion of both black and white writers helps readers better understand the constraints and opportunities that influenced their choices.

Structured into three thematic sections—Labor, Land, and Love—the book focuses on seven key figures: Marvel Cooke, Louise Thompson Patterson, Claudia Jones, Alice Childress, Josephine Herbst, Meridel Le Sueur, and Muriel Rukeyser. Each section begins with biographical and theoretical framing. I especially enjoyed

how Hennessy includes the reader in her intellectual journey, posing questions, describing exciting discoveries, and contemplating the ongoing significance of the issues these women addressed. These include domestic labor, white supremacy, a relationship to the land, and “the energies of interdependence that maintain the web of life” (2).

Because she wanted to make her book accessible to strong non-academic readers, Hennessy provides clear explanations of context and theory. I admired the way she illuminated the appeal of communism in 1930s America, something key to understanding the motivations of these women. Not only did

communism seem vibrant at a moment when capitalism seemed to have run its course, but it also engaged in significant anti-racist work (33). Throughout the book, Hennessy is particularly interested in the undertheorized “labor of social reproduction,” the domestic labor essential to making sure that workers could return to work the next day, crucial to “capitalist accumulation” (20). Extending outside the home to places like churches and community centers, this often invisible but essential labor, as we saw during the pandemic, continues to fall on women, workers of color, and immigrants. Cooke, Thompson Patterson, Jones, and Childress wrote about and advocated for black women domestic workers, among the most exploited in the country. Hennessy documents how they and many others networked and theorized to “summon the collective strength to fight for essentials and alternatives” (28).

In the chapters on Land, which center on Josephine Herbst and Meridel Le Sueur, Hennessy describes how their concern for Depression-era farmers and their relationship to the land brought “an ecological consciousness” to the Left (86). In the 1950s they began to grapple with the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. As a white person who loves the outdoors, I found the framing chapter where Hennessy discusses the impact of whiteness on one’s relationship to landscape especially thought-provoking.

In the third section on Love, most pertinent to readers of this newsletter, Hennessy focuses on Eros as central to Rukeyser’s work. Audre Lorde’s essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1978) was familiar, but Hennessy’s unpacking and expansion of the concept was revelatory. Describing eros as “. . . Felt in the body before the brain can produce the words to name it,” Hennessy defines it as “an intensity in the positive, life-enhancing register that stimulates and enlivens as it is transferred between bodies; it infuses an environment, transmits enthusiasm, pleasure, affinity, or joy” (192). Though it is often “confined by convention and ideology within discourses that help reproduce the relations of capitalism, . . . It can and does spill beyond those discourses . . . into unruly sensations and energy exchanges. Its truth resembles the truth of imagination or intuition that passionately pursues the unthinkable and impossible, what is censored or forgotten”(192-3). She concludes that “Rukeyser understood this bodily intensity as the catalyst and effect of the creative process” (193).

Building on this insight, Hennessy unpacks the ways that Rukeyser tracked the “subversive” energy of Eros “across public and intimate environments” with an eye for breaking open conventions, illuminating overlooked relationships, and envisioning new connections. She begins with Rukeyser’s genre-challenging biography of Willard Gibbs, the pioneer of physical chemistry, whose work formed the basis for capital investment in natural resources. Hennessy details Rukeyser’s fascination with his use of analogy, connecting it to Eros’s sensitivity to relationships that defy established norms, which might make possible a “degree of freedom” in a heterogeneous system (197).¹

Hennessy’s focus on Eros and system paves the way for her explication of Rukeyser’s other texts that recognize and critique racial practices, revealing their artificiality and potential for being changed. To appreciate Rukeyser’s insights in the unpublished essay “Women and Scottsboro” and in *Theory of Flight*, Hennessy outlines the Communist Party’s failure to address the complex social and historical context surrounding the Scottsboro trials which deeply impacted Rukeyser. In March 1931, nine black teens, hobbing in search of work, defended themselves when a group of whites tried to force them from a train. The black youth prevailed, but the white men complained to authorities who stopped the train.

¹ Readers interested in Rukeyser’s uses of analogy should consult Stefania Heim’s 2013 essay, “‘Another form of life’: Muriel Rukeyser, Willard Gibbs, and Analogy” which first drew attention to these themes (*The Journal of Narrative Theory* 43.3 (Fall 2013): 357-83).

Subsequently, two white women, also on board, facing charges of their own for vagrancy and prostitution, falsely accused the black teens of rape. Indicted, tried, and convicted within two weeks, the teens' cause was taken up by the Communist Party. Hennessy describes how the Party failed to confront the way that the cult of Southern Womanhood exploited sex and race to oppress the black community and split the working class. In her essay Rukeyser, who reported on one of the trials, problematized ostensible oppositions between black mothers who spoke out on behalf of their sons, and the white women accusers. She emphasized the significance of the issue for working women, as it was the limited work opportunities that sent both the young black men and the young white women to seek better prospects on the road.

This 'lost' essay, "Women and Scottsboro," which is now available to readers in *The Muriel Rukeyser Era: Selected Prose*,² informs Hennessy's truly innovative reading of Rukeyser's strategy in *Theory of Flight*. Hennessy argues that Rukeyser sought to disengage the power of Eros from its habituated ties to Christianity and the defense of white womanhood, to recognize its social conditioning, and to realign it for revolutionary ends, "to see the erotic in terms of a long American legacy of passionate revolt" (214). Hennessy's approach suggests the importance of additional study to place Rukeyser's work in relation to the broader context of her predecessors' and contemporaries' works on racial violence such as Ida B. Wells's "A Red Record" (1895), Langston Hughes's "Christ in Alabama" (1931), or Arthur Raper's sociological study *The Tragedy of Lynching* (1933).

The penultimate section on "The Book of the Dead" addresses the Hawks Nest tragedy where hundreds of men, predominantly black, were knowingly exposed to silica, which causes silicosis. In this section, Hennessy's earlier lines of inquiry on labor, land, race, and the erotic come together as she explores the complex relationship between Rukeyser and photographer Nancy Naumburg, for whom she had unrequited feelings. In 1936, the two women traveled to West Virginia to interview surviving workers, hoping to create a joint project to document the tragedy. Rukeyser's poem records the testimony of George Robinson, the spokesperson for the workers, who critiqued capitalism's race and labor distinctions: "as dark as I am, when I came out at morning after the tunnel at night, / with a white man, nobody could have told which man was white." In relation to this critique of the capitalist use of race, Hennessy examines Naumburg's photograph of the Robinsons' kitchen in which objects stand in for domestic labor and hint at the presence of Mary, his wife (229). To elucidate the potential power of the poem and the image, Hennessy layers theories, starting with Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image in which the past suddenly illuminates the present (232). She then incorporates Ariella Azoulay's notion that a photograph also "bears the seal of the photographic event" envisioning a community around both Robinson's words and Naumburg's photograph. This community encompasses the workers—their achievements, the corporate exploitation, the state neglect, their families—and extends to the "collaboration" between George, Mary, Muriel and Nancy whose diverse identities and relationships suggest other ways of being and relating (233). It also includes us and future viewers: "In a flash a different temporality appears, its erotic charge allowing us to grasp the concept of race in a radically new way and perhaps to also see a new relation to life making emerging from the darkness" (233). This vision is profoundly beautiful.

However, at times the optimism of Hennessy's approach may not take full account of the complexities of Rukeyser's treatment of racism. Hennessy does not address Tim Dayton's discussion of Rukeyser downplaying racism in the poem; nor does she remark on the Jones family's whiteness. Additionally, Catherine Venable Moore's documentation of subsequent corporate obstruction, state indifference, and the enduring sense of loss felt by workers' descendants presents a more tenuous sense of progress.

² Edited by Eric Keenaghan and Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, Cornell UP, 2024, pp. 123-26.

Nonetheless, the fact that Hennessy doesn't resolve issues that still endure does nothing to detract from the power of her discussion of Rukeyser and her contemporaries. The book, culminating in an incisive exploration of Rukeyser's relationship with Alice Walker, stands out for its remarkable depth and originality, providing a wealth of material for future contemplation. A recent book published just this year by photographer Raymond Thompson Jr., featuring an essay by Rebecca Altman on the environmental history of this area, extends Rukeyser's document and should further shape our understanding of the imagined community.

From the Archives: Muriel Rukeyser and Louise Kertesz in Conversation

In the summer of 2021, Louise Kertesz donated a rich stash of materials to Eastern Michigan University's Halle Library Archive, comprising letters, photographs, and research materials including notes and duplicated documents that she had collected during the years of researching and composing *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser*. Published in 1980, the book is the first study of Rukeyser's published oeuvre and its critical reception. Kertesz's donation also includes three cassettes of her conversations with Muriel Rukeyser, the first of which took place on July 11, 1977, the second on January 2, 1978. Both are now digitized and transcribed by the EMU Archive and will be available soon to the general public.

I want to talk a bit about the first of these recordings when the two met in person, for the first time, in Rukeyser's Westbeth apartment. Before the meeting, Kertesz had sent a complete draft of the entire book to Rukeyser, who was delighted, praising the "grace" of her work and her depth of understanding. Rukeyser was slowly recovering from a second stroke, something we can hear in the occasionally slurred quality of her voice and her acknowledged difficulty engaging in fine-motor activities like grasping and sorting through paper. The process of recovery, however, as she told Kertesz, was one "I enjoy very much."

Kertesz came prepared to ask pointed questions, many of them about Rukeyser's life—her friends, her political activities, her involvement with the San Francisco Renaissance, her relationship to other poets like Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, and Denise Levertov. She had sent Rukeyser lists of such questions in advance (now in the EMU archive) and was hard at work constructing a detailed chronology of Rukeyser's life to place at the end of her book.

Fortunately, what unfolded was not a one-sided interview, but a genuine conversation that touches on a great many topics, both literary and biographical. Rukeyser speaks with disarming openness about her difficult family relations; her mother's panics—she was "afraid of anything, any smell, any sound"; her father's shady business partner, the Italian-American fascist and mobster Generoso Pope (she thought him involved in the murder of the antifascist labor organizer and activist Carlo Tresca); and her delight when her sister Frances, six-years her junior, took her side against their father and insisted that she had been "disobedient," too. (It seems that after the death of their father, in 1958, the sisters found out they had been disinherited for "ingratitude and disobedience"). The free-flowing conversation meanders widely. Rukeyser touches on *The Orgy* and the actual name of the English psychologist—Rupert Strong, "so good and awful, and Horatio Alger that it's impossible to put in the book"—and his Irish wife, Este. She speaks about her never-ending self-questioning concerning the death of Otto Boch, the German marathon runner and communist, with whom she fell in love in Spain and who remained for her a model of political and personal courage—and perhaps the symbol of an alternative (and socially more legible) life as the wife (or widow) of an anti-fascist fighter in the Spanish Civil War. She wonders about her own fears, and her inertia—why did I not go back to Spain, when I did go to California?

Looking back at these things, why was I unable to raise the money to go on to finish college? Why was I unable to raise the money to go back to Spain? It would have meant going underground and across the mountains, as other people did and this is what I question looking back.

When Kertesz broaches the matter of F. O. Matthiessen's suicide, Rukeyser, alluding to his homosexuality and closeted existence, voices her views on suicide as "seeing yourself as unable to make the next step"; as "the inability to learn or to make the effort, or somehow to do the work that leads to rebirth..." Rukeyser mentions her own half-hearted suicide attempts as a young woman and how the mere thought of taking one's life became impossible after the birth of her son. What's remarkable though is her silence on the trials of her own carefully guarded double-life in the 1940s and 50s; what might she have told Kertesz about her relationship with May Sarton or Monica McCall, had she been asked. Perhaps nothing at all?

A good number of Kertesz's questions circle around Rukeyser's relationship with Allen Ginsberg, whose poem "Howl" had been published two years before Rukeyser's own *Body of Waking*, a book of poems, Rukeyser says, that received hardly any response. Kertesz is clearly puzzled by that. How is it, she wonders, "that in the late 40s, and 50s, to be a prophet or a sybil, was just ridiculous ... And yet, now, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder and anyone who has the incantatory or visionary voice is hailed as what we all need." By way of an answer, Rukeyser alludes to the repressive climate of the 1950s, the blacklisting of Little, Brown editor Angus Cameron and authors like herself who espoused progressive politics. Rare to complain, Rukeyser does express real sorrow at the critical neglect of her books in the 1950s.

Throughout the conversation, Rukeyser mentions the many people she knew and worked with—artists, intellectuals, scientists—among them the poet Kenneth Rexroth (one of her staunch defenders even when he maligned her friends), the painter and muralist Ben Shahn, who had "charmed" her into working with him at the Office of War of Information; her scientist friends, the embryologist Herbert Evans (who got in touch with her after reading *Willard Gibbs*), geneticist Alfred Marshak, and nephrologist Thomas Addis; her California friends, the journalist Ella Winter and poet Marie Welch whose handsomely bound book of poems, *The Otherwise*, she gave to Kertesz as a gift. There is much emotion in Rukeyser's voice when she tells her the story—"a story about the other side of what you call a group"-- of how Welch never found recognition as a poet in her part of the country, the south of San Francisco. And she mentions the poem "Verde Verde," which Welch had written for her and which beautifully invokes Rukeyser's death-defying spirit:

The green hill rises in the thunder-shadowed
 Images and arguments of your myth
 And all the wills in your broken world
 Move wholly against death.

These recordings of more than three hours of unscripted conversation are an extraordinary gift to Rukeyser readers. They capture Rukeyser's voice—not the poet's voice, but the woman's voice, attentive, humorous, and kind. And they capture Louise Kertesz's voice as well—precise, serious, and at times overcome by Rukeyser's warmth and generosity. The recordings of both conversations will be available online through EMU's Digital Commons soon. Of course, they become even more meaningful when read in unison with the other materials that Kertesz donated to EMU, and which are worth a visit to Ypsilanti, Michigan. (<https://omeka.emich.edu/s/EMUarchives/page/emuspecialprojects>). (Elisabeth Däumer)

“The Way In”: Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Speed of Darkness* and Poetry of the 1960s

Wednesday, October 9, 2024, saw the first gathering of our new online Muriel Rukeyser Reading Group: Reading Poems with People. This inaugural program was organized, introduced, and facilitated by Trudi Witonsky, Associate Professor in the Department of Literature, Writing, and Film at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, and Craig Werner, Professor Emeritus of African American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Written and published at a time of dizzying change, Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Speed of Darkness* has rarely been placed in conversation with the political and poetic upheavals of the mid/late 1960s. In their introductory comments, Trudi and Craig approached the volume as part of a broader cultural movement to imagine, as Rukeyser phrases it in “Akiba,” “a new song,” to chart “the way in” to a new political poetics. In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser defined the work of poetry in ways that took on new life in this era. As “an art that lives in time, expressing and evoking the moving relation between the individual consciousness and the world,” poetry increases our “capacity to make change in existing conditions.” Rukeyser’s exploration of those possibilities places *The Speed of Darkness* in dialogue with the politically active poets of the Sixties, among them Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, Bob Dylan, Denise Levertov, and Amiri Baraka. Inviting viewers into a call-and-response conversation, Trudi and Craig then turned our attention to a set of poems—“Delta Poem,” “Poem,” “The Poem as Mask,” “Akiba”—that establish Rukeyser’s awareness of central “Sixties” concerns, including the war in Vietnam, civil rights, the emerging feminist movement, and economic exploitation. The final segment of the meeting consisted of a detailed reading of “The Outer Banks” as an underrecognized touchstone of late-Sixties poetry.

The entire program was recorded and can now be accessed at the Muriel Rukeyser Living Archive: <https://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/news/the-way-in-muriel-rukeyser-the-speed-of-darkness-and-poetry-of-the-1960s/>. Please share the links with students and colleagues.

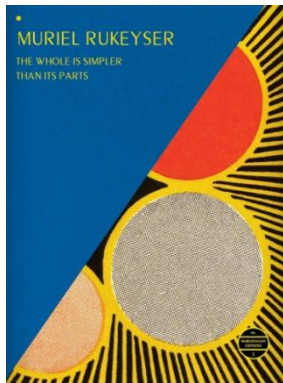
We want to thank Trudi and Craig for putting together a spectacular program! And we hope others will feel inspired to organize a program of about 60-90 minutes focused on selected Rukeyser poems. Facilitators will choose poems and invite one or two participants with whom to discuss them. The programs will be open to the public, whose active participation is always welcome. If you are interested in facilitating one of these programs, please contact us at <https://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/contact/>

Rukeyser News

For the second year in the row, a book on Muriel Rukeyser has garnered the prestigious MLA Award for bibliographical and archival scholarship. Last year, it was Rowena Kennedy-Epstein’s *Unfinished Reach: Muriel Rukeyser’s Twentieth Century* (Cornell University Press); this year, it’s ***The Muriel Rukeyser Era: Selected Prose***, also published by Cornell University Press and edited by Eric Keenaghan, Associate Professor of English at the University at Albany, State University of New York, and Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, Professor of Gender Studies and Women’s Writing at the University of Bristol. Congratulations

Eric and Rowena! What a wonderful way to help readers understand Rukeyser's vast and varied archive of writings and ideas.

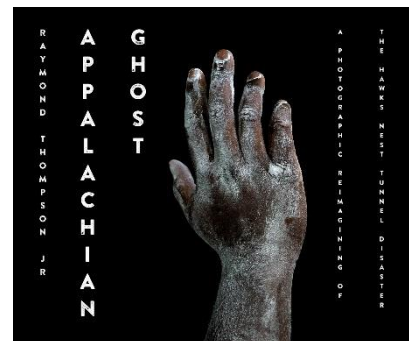
Not to be missed! **MLA session on Muriel Rukeyser: Beyond Ourselves—Contemporary Poets on Muriel Rukeyser**, January 9, 3:30-4:45pm, Hilton New Orleans Riverside. This session is dedicated to the book with the same title, forthcoming from West Virginia University Press, and brings together its editors Stefania Heim (Western Washington U) and Catherine Gander (Maynooth U), and some of its contributing poets: Khadijah Queen (Virginia Tech), Jena Osman (Temple U), and Daniel Borzutzky (U of Illinois, Chicago).



A new edition of Rukeyser's biography of Willard Gibbs, introduced by Maria Popova, is forthcoming in 2025 from Marginalian Editions, a new imprint that publishes works discussed on Popova's Marginalian blog (formerly Brainpickings). **Willard Gibbs: The Whole Is Simpler Than Its Parts** can be preordered from Bookshop: <https://bookshop.org/p/books/willard-gibbs-american-genius-muriel-rukeyser/20705764>

Maria Popova has been an astute and indefatigable advocate for Rukeyser's work. Over the years, she has published many blog posts devoted to Rukeyser whom she describes as "one of the most dazzling, deepest-seeing, under-appreciated minds and spirits of the past century." Popova's Marginalian is a blog to follow: <https://www.themarginalian.org/>

Appalachian Ghosts: A Photographic Reimagining of the Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster, by Raymond Thompson Jr., is now available from The University Press of Kentucky. Introduced by Catherine Venable Moore, this stunning book of photography and poetry seeks to retrieve what has been erased from historical memory of the industrial disaster—the men, most of them black, who worked and died in the tunnel. Thompson includes Rukeyser's poem "Tunnelitis" and acknowledges how the documentary aesthetics of *The Book of the Dead* "breathe[s] life into the cold facts of traditional news reporting about the incident." He was especially moved by Rukeyser's "George Robinson Blues," in particular the lines



*As dark as I am, when I came out at morning after the
tunnel at night
with a white man, nobody could have told which man was
white.
The dust had covered us both, and the dust was white.*

They inspired him to create a series of images focusing on the amorphous silica dust "that covered everything at the work site."

