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Teaching Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" in an Interdisciplinary Women and Environmental Justice Class

By
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Several years ago Goucher College instituted an environmental sustainability requirement. Students can satisfy this requirement by taking a course in a number of departments, primarily within the hard sciences. Concerned that the courses offered did not address issues related to environmental justice[1], I developed a class titled "Women and Environmental Justice" which is offered through the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGS) Program. This interdisciplinary class combines articles from women's studies and environmental justice with documentaries, memoirs, and creative writing. (My primary affiliation is in the English Department.) Scholarly articles provide students with knowledge of how women from poor and minority communities are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. Creative work helps students to see and feel the experience from the victims' perspective.

Muriel Rukeyser's long poem "The Book of the Dead" is writing of witness that represents one of the nation's worst industrial tragedies that has been largely forgotten. The poem graphically depicts environmental racism and classism, while underscoring the often-unacknowledged toll industrial accidents take on women. Reading and discussing "The Book of the Dead" not only informs students about an event suppressed in American history, but also raises their awareness of the devastating toll of environmental catastrophes on minorities and women in particular. Furthermore, the poem represents how industry, government, and to a lesser extent medicine, are complicit in creating an industrial tragedy.

[1] Since I developed "Women and Environmental Justice" the college has increased its offerings on environmental issues. A class on environmental justice is now offered. It does not examine creative writing as my class does.

Background

"The Book of the Dead" is based on the Hawk's Nest tragedy in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. During the late 1920s Union Carbide began building a hydroelectric plant on the New River. The project required construction of a tunnel at Hawk's Nest, which commenced around 1930, when the nation, and especially Appalachia, was reeling from the Depression. While some local men worked on the project, approximately 80% of the workers were African-American migrants from the South, lured by the promise of steady employment. The mountain, however, was almost pure silica (an ingredient used in making glass). Masks were not provided, even when workers requested them, because Union Carbide would have lost time when workers paused every hour to rinse out these masks (Thurston 60). Likewise, before drilling silica should be hosed down so that dust is minimized. The company chose dry-drilling because it was estimated to be three times faster (Kaldec).

Dr. Helen Lang from West Virginia University's Department of Geography and Geology estimates that 63% of the white men who worked at Hawk's Nest died within 6 years of acute silicosis, a horrible lung disease. There is much less information about the number of African-American men who died, but estimates of all worker deaths range from 600 to 2000. In 1936 Muriel Rukeyser, a privileged New Yorker, traveled with photographer Nancy Naumberg down highway U.S. 1 to Gauley Bridge (Goodman 269). The resultant "The Book of the Dead" appears in a poetry book titled *U.S. 1.*

Environmental Racism and Classism

'The Book of the Dead" highlights the centrality of racism in Union Carbide's unscrupulous business practices, while it suggests the motivation of black migrants who, as is typical of Americans, moved in search of a better life. "George

Robinson: Blues" ironically announces the speaker's optimism in the beginning, "Gauley Bridge is a good town for Negroes, they let us stand/ around, they let us stand around/ on the sidewalks if we're black or brown." Yet this segment of the poem ends with Robinson's terrifying description of the working conditions:

> 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.

After students express shock at just how much silicosis exposure the men suffered, class discussions of these lines invariably turn to the theme of white privilege and the ironic equalizing effects of its abuses: Both white and African-American workers contracted silicosis and died. However, while both races may have died the same deaths, they did not live the same lives.

African-American workers, I inform students, paid more for their segregated housing and earned less in wages (Kaldec, Lang). Stated death benefits were also starkly different; a single African-American worker was entitled to $400, while a married white man was entitled to $1000 (Lucas and Paxton).[2] When confronted with these facts, students from WGS studies and sociology in particular frequently bring up the concept of intersectionality. Being a poor white tunnel worker is in many ways different from being an African-American one, although being a white worker is far different from being a white industrialist. Evocations of solidarity, so characteristic of the 1930s, must grapple with these differences. [3]

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[2] According to Lucas and Paxton, compensation laws were filled with loopholes, and most affected workers collected very little, if any, money.
[3] See Kaldec on this point.

Regional Issues

Goucher College students, primarily from urban and suburban areas, are in reading "The Book of the Dead" outsiders trying to situate themselves in an unfamiliar landscape. The section "Gauley Bridge" opens with a reference to the camera "see[ing]" what is called "the city" but what appears to be a small depressed hamlet, for we are told "any town looks like this one-street town." Shira Wolosky notes that the poems in *US.1* are a play on the U.S. Road Series published in 1938, and she sees Rukeyser's work as a counternarrative to those of the government and tourist agencies (159). This counternarrative is clearly articulated in the end of this section with the lines "What do you want — a cliff over a city?/ A foreland, sloped to the sea and overgrown with roses?/ These people live here." While the last line cautions against romanticization of the land or its people, it also implicitly cautions against reducing catastrophe to spectacle (Wechsler 131). Readers of texts on environmental justice often encounter people whose race, class, and region are unfamiliar, and they must learn to understand these people's lives. The issue extends beyond readers' standpoint. Documentaries, an emergent form in the 1930s on which Rukeyser modeled "The Book of the Dead," are an important medium in the contemporary environmental movement. (Most notably, I think of *Gasland.*) A writer or producer may explicitly or implicitly frame his or her standpoint, but the standpoint cannot be ignored. In his "Teaching the Experimental Arts of American Protest," Joseph Entin argues that Rukeyser's multivocal documentary poem provides one model for ethical viewing (4). Rather than giving us one voice of authority — especially her own white middle-class voice — Rukeyser combines her observations with the words of victims and their families as well as with court testimony.

Science

Muriel Rukeyser was intensely interested in science and its affinities with poetry. She wrote an unauthorized biography of Willard Gibbs, a nineteenth century physicist whom she ranked with Herman Melville and Walt Whitman as the century's greatest thinkers (*LP*). To her, these men's genius lay in their demolishing barriers. In The *Life of Poetry* Rukeyser lamented that highly specialized educations produced experts in narrow, rarified fields rather than visionaries. Gibbs, in contrast, was a man of "pure imagination." In his theory of thermodynamics she saw a way to explain the connection between science and poetry (Morehead 330). In her words, "The world of the poet. . . is the scientist's world. Their claim on systems is the same claim. Their writings anticipate each other; welcome each other; indeed embrace" (*LP* 11).

While Rukeyser's writing suggests a communion between science and poetry, Jenny Goodman states that in her introduction to Gibbs' biography Rukeyser alludes to her outsider status as a woman and a poet (271). The position of being an outsider struggling to understand the complexities of science and gain a measure of acceptance among scientists is one in which environmental justice scholars and advocates frequently find themselves. Also, my course appeals to students who are interested in social justice and gender issues, but also to students who are uncomfortable with the hard sciences. With the consequences of climate change already being realized, often most acutely by vulnerable populations, we cannot afford to be intimidated by science. We must, as Rukeyser did, learn basic principles. In "The Dam" Rukeyser enacts an understanding of the laws of thermodynamics, especially in the section's final lines:

> Nothing is lost, even among the wars
> imperfect flow, confusion of force.

It will rise. These are the phases of its face.
It knows its seasons, the waiting, the sudden.
It changes. It does not die.

As an outsider, Rukeyser also has insights that insiders lack. In "The Book of the Dead" she repeatedly suggests the conflicting roles that science and technology have played in human lives. Shoshana Wechsler notes the irony in the fact that silicosis, often misdiagnosed as tuberculosis or pneumonia, was accurately diagnosed with x-ray technology that is silicon based (124). Similarly, the construction of the Hawk's Nest tunnel, which resulted in a horrific tragedy, was a triumph of civil engineering (122). These paradoxes help us to understand a seldom-mentioned reason why some people may be skeptical of the science of climate change. Science warns of impending problems, but it also creates problems. Furthermore, as "The Book of the Dead" shows, race and class privilege often determine who will benefit from scientific advances and who will bear the costs of these advances.

Gender Issues

While race and class are in the foreground of "The Book of the Dead," in both its composition and themes the text highlights a number of gender issues "The Book of the Dead" is often thought of as a series of poems, but it is, as critics have noted, a long poem in the modernist vein answering T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." As a poem that includes history, it meets Ezra Pound's definition of an epic poem (Bernstein 75). Jenny Goodman further argues that it is an epic reworked to present women as agents of myth and history, and that this fact is significant because the epic is often thought to be a particularly male genre (268). Students with some knowledge of epics such as *The Iliad* know that it tells the story of a people's or a nation's fate. Rukeyser appropriates a traditionally male genre to tell the story of a group of forgotten Americans.

As my class has noted in reading works by writers such as Terry Tempest Williams and Helen Viramontes, when environmental disasters occur, women become the caretakers of ailing husbands and sons. Goodman points out that "The Book of the Dead" likewise represents women in this role (274). "Absalom" is the clearest example. This section is narrated by a mother who focuses on her youngest son's death; the older two also have died, and her husband is ill. She names each of her sons and several other victims, giving identities to workers whom Union Carbide would not recognize as individuals. She thus acts upon her final resolution to "give a mouth to my son" and to those who died as her son did. Given the large number of African-American men who remain unnamed and unaccounted for, we may wonder about the women also left unnamed and voiceless.

Praxis

In "Women and Environmental Justice," we frequently speak of praxis, the first step toward which, I believe, is understanding interlocking systems of oppression. For Rukeyser, both science and poetry are systems of relations. "The Book of the Dead" represents a series of relations or institutions—medicine, science, government—that have been complicit in what amounts to the murder of hundreds to thousands of men (Wolosky 157). The end of the poem suggests renewal through evocations of Isis and Osiris, but these are not the poems' only instances of hope. In *The Life of Poetry* Rukeyser states, "Art is action, but it does not cause action: rather, it prepares us for thought" (25). After reading Rukeyser, students are prompted to think about the relationship of the Hawk's Nest Disaster to fracking, to mountaintop removal, and to the dumping of wastes in rural communities of color. As important, they may reflect on the complicity of all stakeholders, including themselves, and ponder what piece in this web of relations could be altered to reconstruct the whole. Finally, they may ask, as Helen Lang

does, why this catastrophe has had no enduring imprint on the popular imagination. Is it the race of the victims or the rural locale of the catastrophe? [4]

Rukeyser as Mother of Environmental Justice

Muriel Rukeyser is often characterized as a proletarian writer, and working-class scholars have a vexed relationship with proletarian writing of the 1930s. Some of us have argued that we should stop focusing so intently on this period when class and worker consciousness was high. I agree that working-class studies scholars must examine texts from all periods of American literature, but I also think we need to re-examine some of the themes in proletarian texts and the strategies that empower the writers' representations. Its documentary form, particularly the voices of workers and their families, enables students to understand and feel the toll of environmental racism and classism. "The Book of the Dead" is a visionary poem calling for environmental justice long before the term was coined. It exposes corporate greed and prompts students to examine the structures that support it. Ultimately, it is art as action.

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[4] Helen Lang notes that the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory of 1911 lives on in the popular imagination while Hawks Nest is practically forgotten.

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Michelle M. Tokarczyk is Professor of English at Goucher College. Her publications include the edited *Critical Approaches to Working-Class American Literature, Class Definitions: On the Lives and Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros, and Dorothy Allison*, and *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory* (co-editd with Elizabeth A. Fay). She is currently writing an essay on proletarian women writers for *A History of American Working-Class Literature* to be published by Cambridge University Press.