Spring 2024

Please Believe: Muriel Rukeyser, Mary McCarthy, and Their Literary Lives

Vivian Noah Hoyden
Bard College

Please Believe:
Muriel Rukeyser, Mary McCarthy, and Their Literary Lives

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature and the Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by

Vivian N. Hoyden

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2024

To hoydens

Acknowledgments

As someone who has spent much of my time in college consumed with considering the weight and responsibility of history as well as its unavoidable silences, the task of writing an acknowledgement section is particularly intimidating, and I wish I could consider the following a draft only, because I am certain it too has its absences.

To Myra Armstead, thank you for being one of my earliest advisors. I know you did not advise this project, but your guidance in my first years as a college student shaped me into the student who wrote this.

To Pete L'Official, thank you for trusting me when I first came to your office and asked to be an American & Indigenous Studies Major, for trusting me again when a year later I decided I also wanted to be a Literature major, and then for so patiently advising this project.

To Cole Heinowitz, thank you for introducing me to Muriel Rukeyser. I will be forever grateful.

To Christian Crouch, thank you for your wisdom, precision, and clarity.

To Deirdre D'Albertis, thank you for all the time you have given me during the past four years – I feel enormously lucky to have gotten to work with you in multiple capacities, and especially to have had you as my senior project advisor. You have shaped my understanding of what it means to be a probing scholar, a writer, and, of course, a leader.

To Jana Schmidt, thank you for your insight and always thoughtful questions.

To Rob Cioffi, thank you for always being willing to talk and offer me support despite my not being a classicist, and for being a valued member of both my first and second moderation board.

To Ethan Bloch, thank you for advising me through an entirely unrelated project that took up a significant portion of fall semester senior year; in a certain way that project and this one will be forever intertwined in my mind.

To all my friends, to the Saturday morning basketball group, and in particular to Grace Brody, Erin Dworkin, Maggie Hough – my first friend at Bard – and Darrion Thornburgh, thank you for the conversations, the laughter, and the encouragement. I have valued every moment spent with each of you, and hope there will be many more such moments to come.

To Leigh Stern, thank you for a decade of friendship and your support from afar these past four years.

To my parents, thank you for your love, your enthusiasm for all that I do, and especially for making it that I've always known I had your steadfast support no matter what. I love you both.

I will treasure these past four years – please know that is because of all of you.

Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say.

-Virginia Woolf

A Room of One's Own

A note on abbreviations:

Due to the repeated citations of specific sources throughout, I use the following abbreviations for the below texts:

AROO: *A Room of One's Own*

HIG: *How I Grew*

LP: *The Life of Poetry*

MRE: *The Muriel Rukeyser Era*

PB: *Physics of Blackness*

TBTD: *The Book of the Dead*

TG: *The Group*

TGS: *Three Guineas*

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

All Things Must be Known

And one
Saw all the women look at each other in hope.
And came back, saying, 'All things must be known.'

-Muriel Rukeyser, Letter to the Front, 1936

"Please Believe The Punctuation" are the words stamped in thick black ink onto the cover page of Muriel Rukeyser's manuscripts sent to publishers for consideration. The stamp is one Rukeyser had custom-made for her in an attempt to head off publisher's frequent questioning of her nonconformist uses of grammar. But in 1930s America, there was more Rukeyser needed a publisher to believe than just her punctuation; she also needed them to believe that the stories she told, and the voice in which she told them – her own, that of an unapologetically Jewish bisexual woman, with leftist political views – were worthwhile for the American public's consumption.

1930s America was self-consciously aware that it was experiencing a period of instability, internal contradiction, and redefinition. The Great Depression, beginning with the stock market crash of 1929, set off nation-wide economic precarity, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's resulting New Deal program permanently put to rest the Jeffersonian argument that America was but a collection of independent states. Meanwhile, Hollywood, a booming movie industry, was reaching new heights; and American Studies emerged as a new academic field. In all of America's endeavors during the 1930s, we can understand image to be central: the period contained tremendous contradiction and marked a time in which ideas of America were under

construction but also contestation. “Images” of America were part of that struggle to emerge from the Great War, overcome the depression, and build a new modern nation in response to those struggles. Communism, perceived as a threat since Karl Marx and Frederich Engels penned and published *A Communist Manifesto* in 1848, became solidified as an enemy to America and the antithesis of democracy in the form of an increasingly powerful, and threatening, Soviet Union, or the U.S.S.R. – the later “red scare” of the 40s and 50s was a reaction against the earlier twentieth century communist party activities and influences. As such, America had the need not only to definitively define itself, but also define itself *against* something else. It is in this context that two women, themselves both drawn to Leftist circles in the early 1930s, Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy, would begin their careers as writers and poets in the American literary scene.

Born in 1913 in New York City, to a father from Wisconsin and a mother from the Bronx, Muriel Rukeyser was raised in a Jewish middle-class home. But she cites her years spent at Vassar College, between 1930 and 1932, as the turning point in her life, and the moment in which she entered into the world in a meaningful sense, even though she left before completing her undergraduate degree. She writes, “to come to college was to enter the world of people” (Rukeyser LP 205). The rest of her life would be dedicated to telling the stories of these people through her writing. She wrote journalistic articles, poetry, a novel (published posthumously), poetry, nonfiction essays, and two biographies. As one scholar of Muriel Rukeyser writes of her oeuvre, “what is it in our culture that causes such discomfort in the presence of contradiction, that places such a high value on conformity? Muriel Rukeyser pondered this question for the fifty years that she wrote and published her poems” (Daniels 26). This project focuses primarily

on these questions she asked in her poetry as the site through which she most explicitly explores the questions of history and memory in a format farthest removed from traditional historical scholarship, but she engaged with multiple genres of literature throughout her career.

Figure 1.1. A Portrait of Muriel Rukeyser. [Source: Jacobi, Lotte, photographer. Muriel Rukeyser, bust portrait, facing right / photo by Lotte Jacobi. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/95517256/.]

Meanwhile, her literary peer Mary McCarthy, was born one year earlier in 1912 in Seattle, to two Catholic parents. She, along with her three brothers, was orphaned at a young age when both her parents died in the 1918 flu epidemic. She spent her childhood being raised by her grandparents and aunt, who she would later recall as abusive, before eventually going to a boarding school for highschool and then arriving at Vassar in 1929 (Kiernan 29). Like Rukeyser, in her multiple memoirs, McCarthy recognizes Vassar as the place which shaped her into an intellectual and writer. After college, McCarthy would pursue writing both fiction and nonfiction alongside stints of college teaching, including for a period at Bard College in the late 1940s and again in the 1980s. She is also remembered for her high-profile friendship with Hannah Arendt

which resulted in the publication of *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy.* Her work is a testament to exploring the world through the written word.

Figure 1.2. A Portrait of Mary McCarthy. [Source: Freire, Carlos, photographer. Mary McCarthy, whose new book, Cannibals and missionaries, ... / Carlos Freire. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/93508094/.]

This project examines the literary relationship between Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy, contemporary authors whose work – both in service of locating the *truth* – diverge despite the two women's shared beginnings as students together at Vassar. During their overlapping years at the prestigious all women's college, 1930-1932, they were both English literature majors and together founded a student-run literary magazine, *Con Spirito*. After college, on a surface level, their work went in different directions; while Rukeyser as a poet and essayist recorded the lives of ordinary Americans through a radical communist lens, McCarthy, in the same decades, spent her time documenting a very different milieu in memoirs and semi-autobiographical novels. But at the core of both of their writings is a dedication to revealing

the truth contained in the personal memories and lives that make up the collective whole. That being said, no significant scholarship currently exists which puts their literature and lives in conversation with one another. McCarthy and Rukeyser appear to take different paths as writers, yet I will argue that they do so to the same end, with the same purpose: to recognize and explore, as significant, the ways in which personal narratives help us know and understand our collective whole, our society of stories. The individual lives that they illuminate simultaneously expose and define important ideas about America in the first half of the twentieth century.

Rukeyser's understanding of history, and the approximate definition that both women work from throughout their writing, can be perhaps best captured in lines of poetry Rukeyser wrote about the German artist Käthe Kollwitz. The six lines of poetry have a lilt to them that contrasts starkly with the blunt vocabulary of war and death. She writes, "Held between wars / my lifetime / among wars, the big hands of the world of death / my lifetime / listens to yours" (Rukeyser "Käthe Kollwitz" 13). The pain of war and death are not excused but instead solace and meaning is located in the promise that the future – "my lifetime" – will listen to the past – and "yours." In these lines we can also locate the turn to the personal, the instability of war and death occurring on an international scale in "the big hands of the world" are counteracted by Rukeyser's rooting these stories within the context of the intimately personal; she speaks to Kollwitz as if sitting directly across the kitchen table from her. Global actions become real through Rukeyser's reading of them through the lives of specific individual people. It is this sense of camaraderie between past, present, and future that both Rukeyser and McCarthy invoke throughout their writing. Rukeyser and McCarthy utilize the past as a mirror through which to interpret our present standing.

The questions of what is private and what is public, and what is personal and what is political, are uniquely feminist questions. These questions apply to our histories as well. As feminist scholar and theorist Ann Snitow writes in her seminal book *A Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary*, the intersection at which patriarchal societies place women as custodians of social norms yet removed from having a place in the social action is an untenable one. She writes, "What does it mean to expect a civil society to flourish that wastes the education of its women, disempowers them in the public sphere, yet asks them – these economically dependent, socially marginalized ones – to glue the realm of the social together?" (Snitow 202). This dynamic of marginalization must be considered when understanding the forms of history Rukeyser and McCrthy were writing against. While the field of history in the present day is well aware of the necessity that historians looks beyond the official records and that a historical telling cannot remain objective – this understanding is perhaps best demonstrated in Saidiya Hartman's book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* which deftly navigates the records of fact and fiction to weave together what Hartman describes as "intimate histories" – this was not the case when Rukeyser and McCarthy were writing. As such, placing their work, and conceptualization of history, in the field of literature is an intentional decision I argue they make in order to be able to engage with their subject matter through a radically feminist lens, and one that makes room for their own personal identities as well as that of their subjects'.

Rukeyser and McCarthy play the simultaneous roles of investigative journalist, documentarian, poet and memorialist in their writings. My Senior Project takes this dynamic as the site to investigate the relationship between fact and narrative. The following chapters are

structured around the questions of how the conceptions of the self, evidence, and completion influence how we understand the appearance of fact in narrative, and specifically how the dynamic between reader and narrator supports such explorations in these texts.

Chapter One focuses primarily on Muriel Rukeyser's 1936 long form poem "The Book of the Dead" about the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster of 1931 in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. While the disaster is virtually unknown and absent from history textbooks, it is one of the worst construction disasters in American history. As author, Rukeyser plays the role of investigative journalist, documentarian, poet, and memorialist. I argue that the poem serves as a central text through which to understand and analyze her choice to turn to poetry, rather than traditional documentarian forms such as journalism or historical nonfiction writing, in order to capture this event. I make this argument primarily through an analysis of the triangular relationship in the poem between author, narrator, and reader.

Chapter Two focuses on Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy's shared time together at Vassar College in the early 1930s, along with the writing McCarthy produced several decades later reflecting on that time, in memoirs writing as well as, most famously, her novel *The Group.* The novel focuses on a group of eight upper-class young women, recent graduates of Vassar, as they figure out what life in the "real world" looks like. As with Chapter One, the role of narration remains central in this chapter. This chapter asks, how were society's expectations conveyed in the cloistered setting of Vassar College? Rather than being isolated on the all womens' college campus, Vassar is the location both Rukeyser and McCarthy cite as the place that introduced them to the world. How, then, did these foundational four years for McCarthy shape her narrative approach to the writing of *The Group*? As author, she is writing from a place of deeply personal

experience, yet the novel features a narrator who is all but invisible. Hidden behind the omnipresent, yet invisible, narrator, is McCarthy's personal evidence and story.

Chapter Three considers the element of completion, and incompletion, inherent within their body of work. Their poems and novels end, but the narrative is often left open-ended. In this chapter I argue that a theorizing of incompleteness in women's writing is necessary for scholars who wish to engage fully with their work. As authors who are engaging with history through a distinctly feminist lens in mid-century America, their work cannot definitively conclude because it is serving to open a conversation for feminist historical thought. Where their work ends, another author's work can, and does, begin. At the same time there is an element of incompletion this chapter engages with that is intertwined with understanding reception of Rukeyser and McCarthy that is external to their creative wishes: the effects that the literary field's sexism and misogyny had on how their work was received and incorporated – or rejected – from literary conversations and canons must be considered.

In addition to close readings of Muriel Rukeyser's poetry and Mary McCarthy's novel and memoirs, this project also makes use of theorists and archival materials to understand their work within a larger context. The work of Virginia Woolf serves as a feminist foundation for understanding Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy as writers. In *A Room of One's Own*, published a decade before Rukeyser and McCarthy would begin publishing their own work, Woolf puts into words what she sees as the contemporary predicament of women as producers of literature. Equally central to this project is the writing of Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History.* His writings on the power, and limitations of the historical field provide theoretical commentary on the themes and underlying

arguments in Rukeyser's and McCarthy's writings. I use his work critically to engage with their texts, even as both women's writings predate his own push to expand the field of history to encompass more honestly and holistically the past.

Finally, and essentially, the following chapters also engage with, and make use of, the authors' archives. Throughout their careers as writers, both frequently turned to archival sources to help share their stories. This decision is apparent in Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead,* where sections of the epic poem are direct quotations she has excavated from archived court case records. But while slightly less direct in McCarthy's writing perhaps, the archive also plays a central role in her writing of *The Group.* In the process of writing the novel over the course of eleven years, she assembled her own archive of sorts: a collection of Vassar brochures and catalogs to help her engage with precisely how Vassar, as an institution, presented its values and approach to education of women over the years. This miniature archive now resides in the neatly titled "Folder 21.7 Research material: Vassar Publications" (Vassar Archive). As a researcher intent on studying both Rukeyser and McCarthy, I employ the same methods they embed within their writings in my approach to understanding their lives and work. The archive was the space to which they turned to better understand the subjects they represented, and it is now the place I turn to place their writings within the context of their life. Writing in the following chapters draws from work conducted in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library in New York City, which has a collection of Muriel Rukesyer's papers, and from the Vassar College Archives in Poughkeepsie, New York, which houses papers of both Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy.

Whether in the case of Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, which concludes with the plea that the reader keep this otherwise unknown history alive, or Mary McCarthy's *The Group* which

ends with a shock accident that the reader is left to interpret, both authors underscore the action required in truly understanding our past – I argue that Rukeyser and McCarthy suggest that the relationship between past and present cannot be passive. Rukeyser's understated request at the start of her manuscripts to please believe her punctuation can be applied more widely as a caution to the reader in approaching all of her writing: her poems, essays, and biographies all come with the implicit request to *please believe* them and the stories contained within.

Both Rukeyser and McCarthy are searching for the truth in the respective lives they represent and they write about their subjects with an extremely frank honesty. Despite their differences, both Rukeyser and McCarthy are searching for truth and both write with the same dedication and urgent call for lives to be remembered that might otherwise remain unremarked, invisible, not part of history as it unfolds in their time and place. Invoking philosopher Walter Benjamin's notion of history, it is up to the present day viewer to attempt to seize these fragments of story and history and through them create the story that is the past. If we are to make the past truly familiar, then it is not enough that events or historical occurrences are documented; evidence in and of itself is no guarantee of remembrance. To be "remembered" is a verb, an action: the evidence must be actively understood. This is the work Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy engage in.

CHAPTER I

Opposed Eyes

"The mothers have become symbols to us of the working woman lifted by catastrophe into the knowledge of her position."

– Muriel Rukeyser "Women and Scottsboro" undated

In 1933, living in New York City, still a college student and only nineteen, Muriel Rukeyser traveled down to Alabama to report on the Scottsboro Boys trial. It marked the beginning of what would be an recurring pattern in her work and life: the importance of journeying to personally witness the site of contestation and struggle in order to create a narrative that could be communicated back to those not present. Whether it was the motivation behind these trips, or a realization that grew from them, her work shows that she understood history to be figuratively and literally personal; the personhood of the narrator of the events and the actors themselves was essential to Rukeyser.

The notion of the self that is established in her work is often the bridge between the narrative and the reader. The narratives she writes are at once personal and historical, intimate yet exceedingly public – they are asking to be known. Then, before Rukeyser's fictive histories can be understood, it is necessary to understand the creation of the narrator themself first. Decades after her early 1930s work, in a 1968 lecture she would deliver at Scripps College in California, Rukeyser would define history as that "which has that vibration in the present, that to

me is history" (Rukeyser MRE 252). It is the responsibility of Rukeyser's narrators to bring the reader's attention to these vibrations.

In Scottsboro, the young Rukeyser found nine young Black teenage boys were accused of raping two white female train passengers; they were immediately charged and jailed and in the following weeks they were found guilty by the all-white jury, despite there being no physical proof or evidence for their supposed crimes. The trial proved to be a moment that thrust the questions and tensions of racism, gender, and White Supremacy that had always existed in America into the spotlight in newspaper headlines across the country (Uffelman 346). Among the writings that survive from Rukeyser's time in Alabama reporting on the case, is an unpublished piece of writing entitled "Women and Scotsboro." In it she reflects through a directly communist lens on the role women (and specifically their role as *working* women) had played in the polarizing events, from the two white women who were the accusers, to the black mothers who were fighting for their sons, and she attempts to understand the ways in which their predetermined social status and class unquestionably impacted the power of their respective actions and the ways in which they were perceived.

Rukeyser writes unabashedly from no other perspective but her own – that of "poet, woman, American, and Jew" – and so it became essential to her work that she immersed herself in any subject she represented, performing her own excavation of the facts, the truths, the perspectives the actors hold, and creating an archive of her own through her writing (Rukeyser MRE 35). Rukeyser scholar Kate Daniels writes that Rukeyser's writing was "from the beginning…highly anachronistic, identifiably 'female,' often self-consciously political, and formally experimental" (Daniels 248). In a 1970 interview with the *New York Quarterly*,

Reuksyer herself reflected on her positionality, in response to a question that if the Elizabethan age is heralded as the "age of poetry" what did she make of her current, present age. She responded,

> One of the attacks on me for writing…spoke of me as a she-poet – that I had no business to be doing this. And I was broken for a while and looked out the window for a while. And then I thought, yes, I am a she-poet. Anything I bring to this is because I am a woman. And this is the thing that was left out of the Elizabethan world, the element that did not exist. Maybe, maybe, maybe that is what one can bring to life. (Rukeyser NYQ 176)

It is on this note that the interview concludes. Only one of five women total interviewed in the book, which consists of seventeen interviews with poets in total, Rukeyser's awareness of what it means for a woman to contribute was a question she was already grappling with four decades prior to the interview, in the early 1930s, well before Second Wave feminism, or Women's Lib, became a national hot topic. Aware of the conversation that precedes her, she collaborates with history from her radical present-day standpoint. The voice of a leftist, Jewish, bisexual woman is not the voice that dominates history or the Western Canon, but it is her voice, and the one that radiates in her writing.

At the beginning of her "Women and Scottsboro" essay, she writes, "The fundamental issues of the Scottsboro case are more clearly tied up with the problems of the woman worker than has been pointed out" (Rukeyser MRE 125). It is essentially her thesis, but it is also noteworthy that in addition to stating her argument – that women's stories are intertwined in the story of these nine boys – Rukeyser also draws attention to the fact that her argument is a glossed over and ignored one – it has not been previously "pointed out." Highly aware that "[h]uman beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators," Rukeyser thus positions her argument amongst the multitude of other arguments, and other narrators, of these events filling

national headlines at the time (Trouillot 2). The short essay, just three pages in length, is reflective of Rukeyser's approach to history: her dedication to telling history from the inside out, as one person among many, and to conceptualize history as events brought about by a series of actors' actions. As narrator, she seams together – as if a tailor stitching a garment – the assembled actions into a whole event. Some literary scholars refer to her narration style as "documentary collage," but her work is not the only collage, Rukeyser understands her own work as one piece fitting in an even larger one – forming what some would describe as a collective consciousness (Weschler 122).

It was in the courtroom that Rukeyser first began to consciously define this historical outlook: as Rukeyser writes in the Scottsboro essay, "The courtroom tells our story" (Rukeyser MRE 124). The sentence captures her approach and dedication to recording the making of history; she locates the courtroom as at heart of her inquiry – a room that physically represents that intersection and interconnectedness of the personal and the political. But whose political personhood is on display? It is equally crucial that she not only locates her focus in the courtroom, but that she also writes "*our* story" (emphasis added). "Our" excludes no one, rather it includes everyone: the defendants, the sister, the stenographers, the black working women, the "conspicuous" white women, but it also includes Rukeyser and the reader too (Rukeyser MRE 125). She acknowledges that her positionality is inseparable from the narrative she is telling, but for her, to be a witness also means to be a part of the event, and in this way, by the act of reading about it, the reader, through joining in knowledge, joins the event as well. We see Rukeyser signaling her positionality clearly when describing the *other* white women in attendance, acknowledging that she too is one. She writes, "during the court proceedings, there were three

other white women regularly present: Joseph Brodsky's sister,…Mary Heaton Vorse, of the *New Republic*, and another student" (Rukeyser MRE 124). It is her use of *other* white women present, and *another* student, through which she indicates her identity, and therefore positionality, to the reader as a fellow white woman and student. It is because she is physically in the courtroom as the case is occurring that she is able to so directly situate her subjects relative to herself. If we think of her work as a map, her physical presence at the location allows her to relate the contents of the map from within its borders, rather than as that of one looking down at a map. She joins with her subjects – in both her narration style and actions – she was arrested while in Alabama for "'fraternizing' with African Americans" (Kennedy-Epstein 29). It is the relationships, actions, and stories shared *between* people that her work documents; as such, author and reader are implicated in the dynamics that shape the final narrative and understanding.

Rukeyser knew she could write from no other perspective but her own, and so it became critical to her work that she, in that role, be as informed as possible. By traveling to the site of her topic, she assumes the position of both the reader and the subject. As a newcomer, she must be introduced, shown around, find her place, just as a reader who begins a new text must do. The trip to Alabama would be one of her first pilgrimages to a site of immense conflict – it was an endeavor she would repeat when she traveled to West Virginia just two years later to report on, and ultimately write the epic poem *The Book of The Dead,* based on the struggles she witnessed at the site of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster.[1]

The Book of the Dead is a long-form poem which recounts the historical tragedy of The Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster, a 1931 catastrophic construction accident in Gauley Bridge, West

[1] And just a few months after that to her, most significantly, she would travel to Spain and witness the beginnings of their civil war, it would be a defining moment in her life, and one that she would regularly refer to in her work throughout the rest of her life.

Virginia that resulted in the deaths of hundreds, or potentially thousands, construction workers' deaths – largely Black migratory workers. At its heart, Rukeyser conceived of the project as a documentarian one, the epic poem initially designed to be published alongside a series of photographs. As writer and public historian Catherine Venable Moore writes in an introduction for the 2018 edition of *The Book of the Dead,* "At twenty three, Rukeyser found out about the nightmare unfolding…from the radical magazines she read, and for which she wrote…So early in the spring of 1936, Rukeyser and her photographer friend, a petite blonde named Nancy Naumberg, loaded up a car with their equipment and drove from New York to Gauley Bridge" (Moore 9). Neither the photographs, nor the accompanying documentary that Rukeyerser was working on, would ever make it to publication; instead, Rukeyser's lyrical verses stand on their own – her second work of published poetry at just twenty-three years old – as a powerful testament to an American tragedy, and the interwoven themes of history, race, capitalism, and memory.

Although there was initially press attention and congressional hearings that inquired into the cause of the deaths and the worker's exposure to the toxic silicosis dust, the coverage was disparaging towards the victims of the disaster from the outset and there was no real resulting action taken (Cherniack 80). As a 1986 history of the disaster, one of the very few published, comments, the Union Carbide corporation – which oversaw construction of the ill-fated tunnel – more than understood that their ultimate culpability lay equally, if not more so, in the type of press coverage they received as it did in any evidence presented in the courtroom – "the power of a modern industrial corporation to influence the modest organs of public communication in a sparsely populated rural region is formidable. Union Carbide's ability, evidenced here, to remain

Figure 2.1. Image of Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, taken in 1938. [Source: Wolcott, Marion Post, photographer. Negro woman washing clothes outside of shacks along the river. On highway between Charleston and Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. Sept. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2017753314/.]

detached, in the eyes of both the public and the law, from responsibility for the events in the tunnel would serve it well during the proceedings" (Cherniack 55). With the aid of smooth public relations – storytelling – the company was able to sweep the immense tragedy aside as simply one of the somewhat unfortunate side-effects of a successful and profitable business. It is no surprise that Rukeyser, who was closely associated with the communist party and its ideals, although she never formally joined, was horrified.

By 1936, Rukeyser traveled down to Gauley Bridge to witness the situation for herself after reading fragments of reportage in the left-leaning magazines. It was no longer front page

news in the *New York Times*, despite the Congressional House Labor Committee still reviewing the tragedy; instead, the Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster, the worst industrial disaster in United States history, was relegated to a short two paragraph article update on the committee's work squeezed in on page two among ads for the "31st Annual Motor Boat Show" and Burberry. The event was largely forgotten and absent from public memory, with even the number of deaths remaining in question (and still unknown to the present day). Muriel Rukeyser wrote the poem around 1936, and the work is a commemoration and testament to both the tragedy itself, and to the handling – or more accurately, near erasure – of its memory.

The core of the poem is formed out of the archive Rukeyser would uncover on her trip. She weaves together snippets of courtroom testimony; legal vocabulary that slices through the narrative sharply in the form of erratic commands – "tell the jury your name" – as if to remind readers that the lawsuit brought bureaucratic paperwork, but no personal relief; and the pained recollections of the victims themselves (Rukeyser TBTD 88). It is telling that once again, as with Scottsboro, Rukeyser understands her topic through the courtroom. Rukeyser sees the courtroom as a site of her story not so much because of the legal decisions that occur under its roof, but instead for the way in which people gather in it. Cross sections of society, groups of people in direct opposition with each other must all sit in the same close quarters. Using similar rhetorical devices to the ones she uses in her Scottsboro essay, once again employing the inclusive "our," Rukeyser describes the West Virginia courtroom early in the poem: "In this man's face / family leans out from two worlds of graves – / here is a room of eyes, / a single force looks out, reading our life" (Rukeyser TBTD 76). A single man on the witness stand, simultaneously a witness, relating what he saw and experienced underground, and being witnessed by the assembled

courtroom audience; he represents past and future: what has happened and the hoped for reparations to compensate for the lung disease and death. The lines highlight Rukeyser's tendency throughout the poem to oscillate her focus between the individual, the "single force," and the many, the community that makes up "our life." Without one, there cannot be the other; Rukeyser portrays communities of mutual dependence: the prosecution needs the defense to argue against, the witness needs the townspeople to represent their trials, the author needs the reader to understand and be impacted. A room just like many others located in towns, municipalities and cities across the country, Rukeyser's poem traces the political and governmental structures intersecting with the intimately personal individual lives of citizens within the walls of the courtroom.

Through following the road into the poem and into the historical event, a metaphor which Rukeyser employs throughout her poem and one which I will discuss in greater detail later in the chapter, the reader becomes a witness. It is a historical event that rarely, if ever, makes its way into the national historical narrative and popular memory. Because Rukeyser's poem is an intentional attempt at changing that; it follows that the trajectory of her narrative is not linear but rather intentionally circular. By including distinct individual voices in the poetic narrative about this early 1930s disaster – the voices of Philippa Allen, Vivian Jones, Mearl Blankenship, George Robinson, Juanita Tinsley, Arthur Peyton – the poem resists abstraction. Rukeyser puts the emphasis on the names of individuals and their lives and lets their personal truths – rather than allusions to truth – carry the poem. These named individual narratives provide evidence of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster, and it is their lives that have shaped the trajectory of the metaphorical road of the poem. Rukeyser does not want the reader to only encounter this history

once, but rather to keep it embedded within and carry it with them – she is not not limiting herself to telling the story once, rather, each testimonial layers on top of the last.

Rukeyser refuses to let anonymity or ambiguity result in silence, instead she explores the reader's relationship with the narrator(s) and how fact and fiction intersect in the narrator's construction of their tale. The poem centers on a catastrophe that killed hundreds of primarily Black migrant workers who traveled to West Virginia for this work; some of her witnesses have names, but some do not. Her work centers around subjects that have been systemically overlooked as subjects worthy of documentation; what is striking is that she does not let certain lack of information lead to more silence. Included in her group of character narrators is a mother who testifies in the court case as to what occurred in the construction disaster – Rukeyser gives her no name, and the reader is left to conclude neither did the court records that form the foundation of this poem. That one anonymous mother stands in for the narrator at large: the word "mother" is irrevocably bound up in the word "responsibility." It is a weight Rukeyser and her narrators carry and provocatively argue is the reader's to carry too.

In a certain sense, history is the present's, and the narrator-mother's, child. Anthropologist and historian Micheal Ralph Trouillot writes in the opening pages of his book on the meaning and uses of history *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History,* "Only in that present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge" (Trouillot 151). It is a privilege to know the story of the Hawk's Nest Disaster, and with it comes the burden of remembering it and incorporating it into the stories of the past. It is on this note that Rukeyser ends her poem, writing, "You young, you who finishing the poem / wish new perfection and begin to make; / you men of fact, measure our times again" (Rukeyser TBTD 121). Written

nearly exactly sixty years apart, Rukeyser's poem dovetails neatly with Trouillot's argument that "a fetishism of the facts" permeates historical scholarship; he writes that this conception of history is "premised on an antiquated model of the natural sciences, [and] still dominates history and the other social sciences. It reinforces the view that any conscious positioning should be rejected as ideological. Thus, the historian's position is officially unmarked: it is that of the nonhistorical observer" (Trouillot 151). It is this status as an objective observer, and by extension an objective reader, that Rukeyser's poem takes issue with. Instead of upholding the ideal of nonhistorical observer, Rukeyser instead argues that author and reader alike must intervene in the text.

On Narration

In academic historical scholarship, the historian serves as the record keeper, the one who collects the evidence, and guides the reader to interpret the past through their scholarship. I understand the record keeper, whether an academic historian or a fictional and elusive "I," to be the steward of the narrative. I use the term record keeper, rather historian or narrator, here to explicitly convey the sense of responsibility to both the reader and the past. In the writings of Muriel Rukeyser, both she and her narrators strive for *comprehension* as well as documentation. Muriel Rukeyser writes in *The Book of The Dead* of history, and the role of those who live after it, "What three things can never be done? / Forget. Keep Silent. Stand alone" (Rukeyser TBTD 117). It is through this understanding of history verbalized by Rukeyser, that this analysis of the role and responsibility of the self of the narrator begins. If the history that she is writing about cannot be forgotten, cannot be kept silent, then it is essential to understand who it is that is doing the remembering, who it is that is doing the telling.

To return to the example of academic historical scholarship, trust for the author, and by extension narrator, is primarily established through their degrees, their position in the academic field, and their convincing and accurate use of sources. Fiction and poetry come with no guarantee of either: the author is not necessarily the narrator, and the first few pages are not obliged to offer a promise of a certain progression. How then does the reader get acquainted with the narrator? And where the job of the narrator in scholarship is expertise, what is the job of a narrator in fiction and poetry? Before an exploration of fictionalized history can begin, it is the task of the fictional narrator to not only convince the reader of the legitimacy of the content, the plot, but also of the legitimacy of themselves.

As with any historical story, the narrative the narrator is left to tell is twofold: the space of the poem is both itself its own unique moment in time, but it is also retelling the events of a prior one: the Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster. As Trouillot writes in *Silencing the Past,* "Human beings participate in history both as actors and narrators…In vernacular use history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened'" (Trouillot 2). It is in this intersection of history in the moment it occurs and history as it is remembered that Rukeyerser's *The Book of the Dead* is located in. The narrators in the poem take turns inhabiting the role of first person eye-witness, and that of the historical recorder, the one who did not witness the events themselves but knows – perhaps even more than the witnesses themselves – of the weight of those events. It is the historian, the storyteller, the poet, the record keeper who puts the events in perspective.

The first instance of a pronoun being used in *The Book of The Dead,* is seven words in, still on the first line. But it is not "I" or "she" that is used, instead it is the intensely familiar

"you," a direct address in the second person to the reader: "These are the roads to take when you think of your country" (Rukeyser TBTD 61). The reader is confronted; they are known before they can know. It is through this commandment, that the reader first makes the acquaintance of the narrator. The assumed familiarity through the use of the second person singular pronoun is jarring – a fact further emphasized by the second line – "and interested bring down the maps again" (Rukeyser TBTD 61) – an indication that the narrator seems to know not only the reader, but their past too. While the reader does not learn so much about the voice that guides them through the fifty-two pages of poetry, the narrator seems to know exactly who the reader is, using "you" to address the reader directly from the opening stanza.

The narrator is ostensibly the guide through the poem, but so too are the literary devices Rukeyser employs from the very first words. The very first metaphor the reader encounters – in the very first line – is that of a road; and it is through this emblem of the road that Rukeyser moves from official court documents and testimonies into the personal memory of the reader. While Rukeyser's poem would seem, on some level, to resist the metaphor and symbolic – the subjects of the poem are, after all, irreducible in their specificity and refuse abstraction – the metaphor lies in the fact that the road, and the repetition of that line throughout the poem, serve as a point of transference and connection between the reader and the historical event written about in the poem. As philosopher Hannah Arendt writes in her book *Life of the Mind,* "Analogies, metaphors, and emblems are the threads by which the mind holds on to the world even when, absentmindedly, it has lost direct contact with it, and they guarantee the unity of human experience" (Arendt 109). The road serves this purpose in *The Book of the Dead.* And while the subjects of the poem do, undeniably, retain their humanity throughout and at no point

become allegorical victims of a historical disaster, there is one crucial abstraction in the poem. It is what the road connects the subjects to, and indeed is the reason for the road's existence at all: the reader. There is no description for who can and cannot read the poem, anyone can (perhaps even anyone *should*). The reader could be absolutely anyone, with any number of characteristics and preferences. And so, in order for the poem to become a successful bridge from the historical event to the reader's personal memory, it must rely on this road, emblematic of a guide, but lacking what a human guide would have: the potential to be unlikable. Intrinsic too to the idea of the road or guide is the idea of movement, but importantly there is a distinction to be made: the road itself does not move, rather, it facilitates movement. Rukeyser's poem functions the same. While the poem itself lacks agency, through *reading* and *remembering* the poem, the reader's understanding – of their history, of their country, of their self – can begin to shift.

The reader will never fully know who the narrator is, an impersonal and ungendered speaker, but the narrator introduces the reader to a cast of characters who temporarily take turns assuming the role of narrator. By breaking the long form poem into sections with subheadings entitled with the name of the witnesses, such as "STATEMENT: PHILLIPA ALLEN" or, "MEARL BLANKENSHIP" and, "JUANITA TINSELY" the temporary narrators' names become momentarily transformed into something akin to a newspaper headline: written in bold and in all capital letters, they are grabbing, demanding, the reader's attention. The reader hears from Philippa Allen, a local journalist; Mearl Blankenship, tunnel worker; an anonymous mother mourning the loss of her sons and the impending death of her husband, also a tunnel worker; George Robinson, a Black tunnel worker; and Juanita Tinsley, an immigrant and family member of those who died. All of these assembled characters tell their pain and history in the first person,

recounting what happened to an assembled courtroom audience, in the very room where it will ultimately be determined how much their pain is worth.

A second group of narrators is assembled in the poem as well, also making use of the pronoun "I," their testimony is not based on personal pain, but instead on expertise. This group is made up of the doctors and lawyers called in for the trial. They speak from the perspective of observation, not lived experience. If a secondary source in historical scholarship is once removed from the occurring event, written *about* the event, but not itself *of* it, the called-in professional experts are the equivalent. Dr. Emory R. Hayhurst, Dr. Goldwater, Mr. Marcantonio, and Mr. Peyton form this group of narrators. They are connected to the tragedy through their areas of specialization but emotionally separate from what occurred, their lives were not impacted.

Trouillot's writing has become revered and his criticism accepted in the historical field in the decades since he wrote his seminal text. And while I use his understanding of forms of historical narration, what is important to remember is that even if Rukeyser's text is now being read in conversation with such texts, this was not an established dialogue when she was writing in the 1930s. Her decision, then, to place the history of the Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster in poetry, and first person narration, rather than a traditional nonfiction format, to prove that the narrative, and empathic comprehension can be more valuable than a gathering of facts or a structured chronology, is a radical one.

Her choice to situate the history within poetry echoes American psychologist and feminist Carol Gilligan's Ethics of Care (EoC) theory, a model that, as with Trouillot's writing, was one that was nonexistent at the time of Rukeyser writing the poem. EoC argues that standards of unemotional objectivity or morality are not in fact neutral ideals, but rather the way

they are currently defined, are inherently masculine and patriarchal constructs. In its place, EoC suggests by considering both women and men, a more fully formed conception of morality or truth can be understood – conceptions that do not reject the traits deemed "feminine" such as emotion. Gilligan writes, "my work offers a different perspective, on psychology and on women. It calls into question the values placed on detachment and separation in developmental theories and measures, values that create a false sense of objectivity and render female development problematic" (Gilligan Reply 332). So too does Rukeyser's work reject such theories of detachment, and indeed close readings of Gilligan and Trouillot offer insight into Rukeyser's poetry, but critically neither were established points of reference at the time *The Book of the Dead* was written.

As comparative literature scholar Michelle M. Wright argues in her book *The Physics of Blackness*, depending on the context through which one views the history of a people or event, the questions that can be asked of that material change, allowing for critical repositioning. Wright demonstrates that questions that can be asked of the nature of blackness and history in America change depending on how they are contextualized: "The horror of women working outside the home, the domestic space, in the 1930s is suddenly flipped in the 1940s with the call for women in the factories, the munitions. Apart from raising questions about what it means to gain civil rights in these contexts, it allows us to shift the question from *what* is blackness, to *when* and *where* is blackness?" (Phiri and Wright). I argue that Rukeyser's poetry allows for a similar shift: by formatting her historical narratives as poetry, she removes her work – indisputably in conversation with history – The Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster – from the traditional scholarly discourses and expectations of a historian. Rukeyser is not asking what is

history, or what is *the* history, but rather, her work foregrounds the questions *where* does history occur, and *for whom* is it constructed?

How does the construction of self in her narratives inform how the reader understands the larger world that these characters inhabit? How is trust for the record keeper established in order for the reader to believe what they convey as "truth"? Rukeyser's work bridges the field of poetics and history, and resists being classified as strictly one discipline or another. I turn again to anthropologist Michele-Ralph Trouillot to understand the position her work occupies. He writes, "Terminologies demarcate a field, politically and epistemologically. Names set up a field of power. 'Discovery' and analogous terms ensure that by just mentioning the event one enters a predetermined lexical field of clichés and predictable categories that foreclose a redefinition of the political and intellectual stakes" (Trouillot 115). It is in this way that Rukeyser escapes the predetermined, and through poetry expands the lexicon through which to document history. The poetic devices of rhythm and repetition are not available to the author writing non-fiction prose. It follows that a literary format that lends itself to repetition – poetry – would also lend itself to a telling, a repeating, of the past.

To tell the past, and to read about the past, are both attempts at knowing the past. It is here that we arrive at the complexity of fact of the past within Rukeyser's poetic narration; Trouillot argues that "the naming of 'fact' is itself a narrative of power disguised as innocence" (Trouillot 114). By removing her work from the traditional format of conveying history, Rukeyser also removes her work from the expected ways in which contemporary historians were framing the past; her work is conscious of narrativizing. Before any close reading of how narrators *within* the text operate and advance the text, the narratorial power Rukeyser assumes as

poet must also be considered. When Rukeyser traveled down to Gauley Bridge, and sorted through the stacks of papers of transcribed court hearings and medical analyses, she made a series of choices, she had to choose which testimonies: which fragments of West Virginia life best told the story of being forgotten, disbelieved, and hurt? In service of the truth, she experiments with it; it is an experimentation with what Trouillot refers to as historicity 1 and 2. He writes, "Power enters into the interface between historicity 1 ['what happened'] and historicity 2 ['that which is said to have happened']. The triviality clause – for it is a clause, not an argument – forbids describing what happened from the point of view of some of the people who saw it happen or to whom it happened" (Trouillot 115-116). "It is a form of archival power. With the exercise of that power, 'facts' become clear, sanitized" (Trouillot 116). Crucially, Rukeyser's poem is free from a chronological timeline or a requirement to slot this history into a larger ongoing discourse in a specific field.

Rukeyser's poem is ultimately a refusal to isolate: to isolate historical events, isolate impact, isolate regions, or peoples. Perhaps fittingly then, this is reflected in Rukeyser's narration method as well. "I," the most individualistic of pronouns of even words in the English language, takes on a collective identity in the poem, for it is passed between several different "I's" throughout. Throughout the poem, "I" is shared between local journalists, surviving construction workers, out of town doctors brought in to testify, grieving family members of the victims, and the lawyers on the case, or "Special Counsel." The "I" simultaneously encompasses the grieving mother who testifies in the courtroom that "He shall not be diminished, never; / I shall give a mouth to my son" and the lawyer who objects to the testifying doctor's detailed responses to

questions with the quip that a short word of agreement or denial would do: “Best doctor I ever knew said ‘no’ and ‘yes’” (Rukeyser TBTD 83, 93).

The Truth Does Not Begin

Muriel Rukeyser’s refusal to isolate the narrator to the role of one person also extends in the way in which she structures time: in the first pages of her seminal text *The Life of Poetry,* she writes of the “dominating woman” in literature – “Have you noticed how our bestselling books are written in reaction to the dominating woman?” (Rukeyser LP 17). What if the dominating woman was the narrator? In Muriel Rukeyser’s poetry, she seems to ask the question: what if that which we react against became the reactor? The power in these fact-fiction narratives is not that they are *not* the truth, but rather that through their distortion, we can see new truths.

Writing in response to *The Life of Poetry,* Rukeyser scholar Rowena Kennedy-Epstein writes of the text that Rukeyser, “develop[ed] literary and political strategies to reorient our traditions and knowledge systems away from Western imperial sources, to write about the lives of others, and about the lives of women in particular – their desires, the experience of birth and motherhood, and their intellectual and artistic practices in patriarchy” (Kennedy-Epstein 137). Rukeyser’s awareness of gender being an inseparable aspect of her writing is apparent in her nonfiction as well as her poetry. It is this understanding of wholeness, that gender and poetry, political ideologies and history, to Rukeyser, are to be understood together, that remains consistent across her body of work. As another Rukeyser scholar writes, “The foundation of her ideas about poetic form rested upon the conviction that poetry was a dynamic process that succeeded or failed according to the relationship between its several parts – the poem, the poet,

and the reader" (Daniels 252). Rukeyser used poetry as a means through which to make her arguments about the structure of time and our relationality to it.

The opening lines of Rukeyser's epic are not an allusion to the story that is to come, but instead refer to the personal past of the reader that has already occurred. The lines are simple: "These are the roads to take when you think of your country / and interested take down the maps again" (Rukeyser TBTD 61). If it were not for the inclusion of the five letter adverb "again" these lines would be in the present, but with the inclusion of again, Rukeyser changes the tense, and with it the conventional understanding of a beginning. Rukeyser's removal of an origin point, through her use of "again," is how she restructures the reader's conception of time, the reader is no longer reading a narrative that is contained within the two yellow covers of the quarter inch thick book, but instead they are reading a narrative that is meant to fit within their own – within their life, and their understanding of the world. It is, ideally, what any good work *should* do, but Rukeyser makes it clear it is the explicit goal of her's. Rather than putting her narrative as the space around which time orbits, as progress narratives do when they begin without acknowledging a prior past, Rukeyser's poem is located in the now because it contends with the temporalities on either side of the now: past and future. Michelle Wright argues, "Unlike a progress narrative, which must move ever forward, reading oneself in the now allows for a broad variety of possibilities, some or all of which might be true in another spacetime, but at present exist as possibilities presented in all the conflicted discourses that make up the 'evidence'" (Wright PB 23-24). Thus, through rooting the poem in the present, by alluding to a past, Rukeyser expands the field of potential evidence, and potential histories, to draw on.

While memory is a recollection of the past, Rukeyser uses it to advance the poem forward; this temporal tension is contained within her repeating line. While "when you think of your country" is an act rooted in comprehension and recollection of the past, it is this past that explains the command of the sentence that "this is the road to take," symbolic of the future. The past therefore, is the reason for moving into the future. Rukeyser communicates this through expanding the present to encompass the weight of the past and the responsibility of the future. Rather than memory being something inert and resistant to progress, memory becomes the mechanism in the poem through which progress and movement is realized.

In Search of…

By March 1933, Muriel Rukeyser would be on her way to Alabama to report on the Scottsboro trial, starting the pattern of "journeying to the source" that she would repeat for multiple projects throughout her life. March 1933 also marked the month that Eleanor Roosevelt, the country's new First Lady, would hold the first ever press conference given by a First Lady, and choose to make it open exclusively to female journalists – a tradition Roosevelt would carry on throughout her tenure in the position. Like Rukeyser, she too was pushing at what the role and responsibility of being narrator, whether of an epic poem, of a period of history, or of a country's latest news, meant and by whom that role could be assumed, with the entire country as a witness. *The Book of the Dead* can be understood to be one voice contributing to that national experiment.

CHAPTER II

Anonymous Mothers

"What do all these people want? No doubt, most of them do not know. The girls, most of them, want to 'live' interestingly, and to be nice, in a modified conventional way –that is, to keep up."

- Mary McCarthy "Novel Notes"

In the late 1930s, after Muriel Rukeyser had won the prestigious 1935 Yale Younger Poets Award, published *The Book of the Dead*, and traveled to Spain to witness their civil war, she returned once more to the place of her undergraduate college education – Vassar – to give a series of lectures entitled "The Usable Truth." While Scottsboro would be her first trip explicitly reflected in her work, and her first engagement with contemporary history in the making, her years as an undergraduate at Vassar College, located in the heart of Poughkeepsie, up the Hudson River, marked Rukeyser's first time away from home.[2] It is here also that Rukeyser's and Mary McCarthy's paths formally converge: both were matriculated students at the same time. During their time at Vassar, both were English majors and teamed up together, along with a cohort of fellow English Majors, among them Elizabeth Bishop, to found the student-run literary magazine *Con Spirito* and helm its editorial board (albeit anonymously at the time).

In literary histories of 20th century American literature, the worlds of Rukeyser and McCarthy have rarely been discussed together: Rukeyser's writing has been frequently

[2] Although home was still nearby, it was only a short train ride back to New York City.

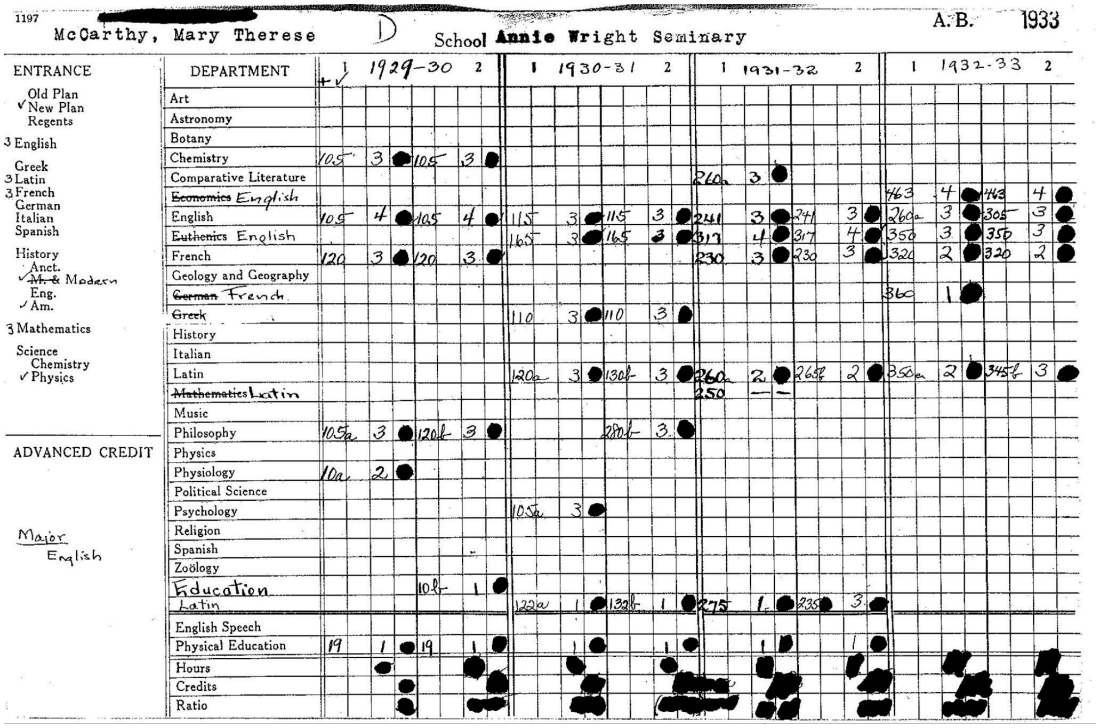
understood to be that of a radical and experimental poet harboring a communist viewpoint (even though she denied that political position throughout her life), and McCarthy's body of work is largely considered noteworthy for her social commentary, received as feminist, and sometimes vulgarly so, due to her determination that no topic should be off-limits in her writing. While Rukeyser experimented with genre and pushed at what the boundaries of the poetic form were, McCarthy stayed within the traditional realm of realist fiction, writing primarily essays, memoirs and novels. Even their personal relationship to the state in adulthood would be a contrast, Rukeyser would live much of her life under surveillance by the F.B.I., while Mary McCarthy would ultimately marry an American diplomat. But it is their shared beginnings as two young women stepping out into the world in the midst of the Great Depression where their work unquestionably overlaps.

Both McCarthy and Rukeyser ground their understanding of contemporary American life in the personal past, whether that is Rukeyser's underlying thesis in *The Book of The Dead* that one must take responsibility for one's own world and country, as one's own, that it is *yours*, or Mary McCarthy's turn to the memoir format even when writing in the novel genre. I see it as fitting then that a scholarly understanding of their work should attempt to employ the same methodologies that they use. It is this shared beginning in college that I suggest merits being thoughtfully considered because it is here that they are first formally introduced to the field that their work is now a part of: American Literature. Both were English majors during their time at Vassar and both took courses in Literature, Comparative Literature, English, and French. Muriel Rukeyser arrived at Vassar having completed her highschool education at Fieldston Ethical Cultural School, a private highschool in New York City in the Riverdale neighborhood of the

Bronx, while living at home with her parents and sister. Mary McCarthy arrived at Vassar after having graduated from the Annie Wright Seminary, a private girls boarding school located on the west coast in Tacoma, Washington. Shortly after arriving, Rukeyser wrote to a friend at Smith College – another one of the Seven Sisters Colleges – summarizing her thoughts on her new home. Writing on her customized stationary, with "Muriel Rukeyser, Vassar College" printed atop each page, she wrote, "I like it here a lot. There are grand people and places and books, and there's loads to do, and they're not strict and I'm close to New York, god bless it! And it's a nice place" (Rukeyser 1930 letter). It was her first time living outside of the city, and similar to the road that guides the reader through *The Book of the Dead*, in later years she would describe college as a break in the road she knew, "To come to college was to enter the world of people…The first day of college ended childhood" (Rukeyser LP 205). The trip to Alabama to cover the Scottsboro case would be her first trip explicitly for a literary project, but with this first move her life as an independent person and author begins.

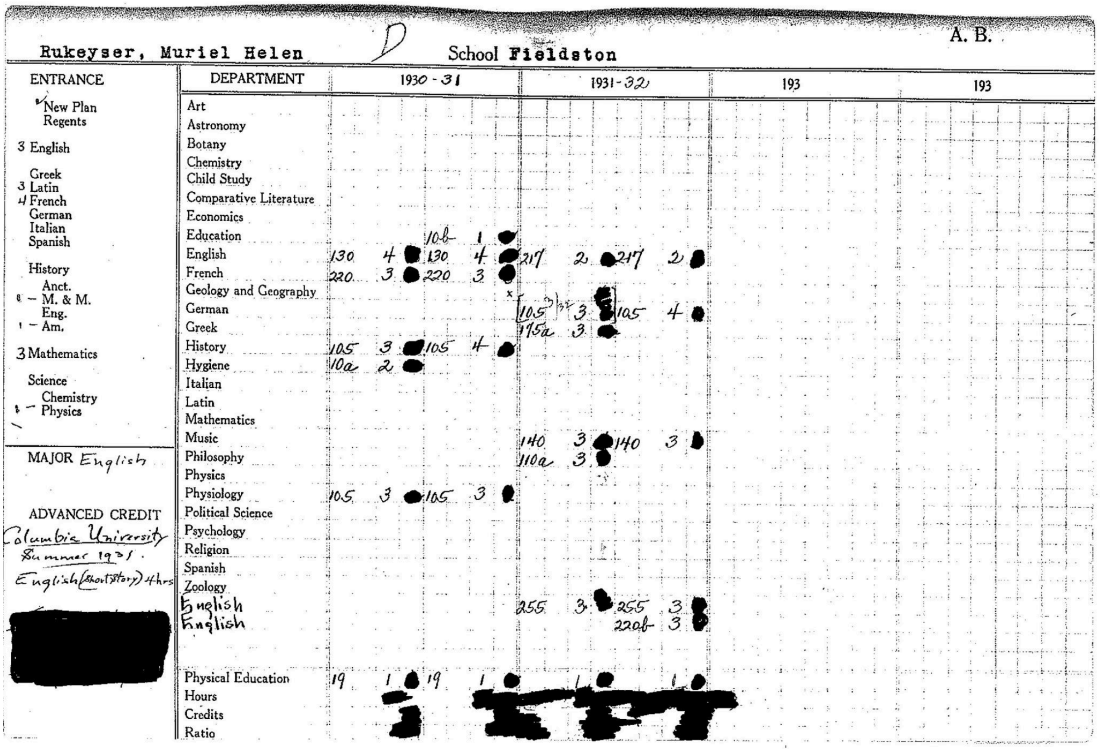
Literary scholarship and criticism of Rukeyser's poetry and writing exist, but few pieces place her work within the larger context of her own life. At the time of this writing, no formal biography on Rukeyser has been published.[3] The personal turn towards autobiography in McCarthy's writing makes McCarthy's personal life feel highly present, although one biography by Frances Kiernan was published in 2002, it is often McCarthy's own writing that is left to speak for her life. I look to these authors' past consciously replicating the methodologies Rukeyser and McCarthy employ in their writing onto my understanding and interpretation of

[3] There have been multiple biography projects started on Rukeyser that were ultimately abandoned, such as Kate Daniels'. Rowena Kennedy-Epstein is currently working on one, and her previous book, *Unfinished Spirit,* is certainly biographical, but it does not cover the whole span of Rukeyser's life.



1197 McCarthy, Mary Therese D School Annie Wright Seminary A.B. 1933

ENTRANCE	DEPARTMENT	1929-30	1930-31	1931-32	1932-33
Old Plan; ✓New Plan; Regents	Art				
3 English	Astronomy				
Greek	Botany				
3 Latin	Chemistry	10.5 3 10.5 3			
3 French	Comparative Literature			240a 3	
German	~~Economics~~ English				463 4 463 4
Italian	English	10.5 4 10.5 4	115 3 115 3	241 3 341 3	260a 3 305 3
Spanish	~~Euthenics~~ English		165 3 165 3	317 4 317 4	350 3 350 3
History	French	120 3 120 3		230 3 230 3	320 2 320 2
Anct.	Geology and Geography				
✓~~M. &~~ Modern	~~German~~ French				360 1
Eng.	~~Greek~~		110 3 110 3		
✓Am.	History				
3 Mathematics	Italian				
Science	Latin		120a 3 130b 3	260a 2 265b 2	350a 2 345b 3
Chemistry	~~Mathematics~~ Latin			250	
✓Physics	Music				
	Philosophy	105a 3 120b 3	280b 3		
ADVANCED CREDIT	Physics				
	Physiology	10a 2			
	Political Science				
Major English	Psychology		105a 3		
	Religion				
	Spanish				
	Zoölogy				
	Education	10b 1			
	Latin		122a 1 132b 1	275 1 235 3	
	English Speech				
	Physical Education	19 1 19 1	1	1	1
	Hours				
	Credits				
	Ratio				



Rukeyser, Muriel Helen D School Fieldston A. B.

ENTRANCE	DEPARTMENT	1930-31	1931-32	193	193
✓New Plan; Regents	Art				
3 English	Astronomy				
Greek	Botany				
3 Latin	Chemistry				
4 French	Child Study				
German	Comparative Literature				
Italian	Economics				
Spanish	Education	10b 1			
	English	130 4 130 4	217 2 217 2		
History	French	220 3 220 3			
Anct.	Geology and Geography				
8 – M. & M.	German		105a 3 105 4		
Eng.	Greek		115a 3		
1 – Am.	History	105 3 105 4			
3 Mathematics	Hygiene	10a 2			
	Italian				
Science	Latin				
Chemistry	Mathematics				
1 – Physics	Music		140 3 140 3		
	Philosophy		110a 3		
MAJOR English	Physics				
	Physiology	105 3 105 3			
ADVANCED CREDIT	Political Science				
Columbia University	Psychology				
Summer 1931.	Religion				
English (Short Story) 4hrs	Spanish				
[redacted]	Zoology				
	English		255 3 255 3		
	English		220b 3		
	Physical Education	19 1 19 1	1	1	
	Hours				
	Credits				
	Ratio				

Figures 3.1. and 3.2. The college transcripts of Mary McCarthy and Muriel Rukeyser. [Source: Vassar College Registrar. Poughkeepsie, New York.]

their own lives to offer a new understanding and interpretation of each woman's life and influences. To understand their work within the larger context of their life and influences, I focus on their college years as a period of explicit shaping and intellectual formation.

Established in 1861, Vassar quickly became known as one of the "Seven Sister" Colleges, a network of highly regarded prestigious women's liberal arts colleges that came into being in the late nineteenth century. When Matthew Vassar, a businessman located in the Hudson Valley, founded Vassar, the first president hired to helm the college was Milo P. Jewett, experienced at leading women's colleges thanks to his prior experience as president of Judson College, another private women's college, located in Alabama. The very space created to be an oasis for women, an oasis from a world of exclusion, was directed and governed largely by men in its early years. During McCarthy and Rukeyerser's time as students, Henry Noble MacCracken was president of the college, and it was his successor Sarah Gibson, who would become the college's first female president in 1946, more than a decade after both Rukeyser and McCarthy were enrolled students.

As Vassar tells their own history on their official website, it was Jewett who encouraged Vassar to found the college. In an 1855 letter to Vassar, Jewett explains his reasoning, "If you will establish a real College for girls and endow it, you will build a monument for yourself more lasting than the Pyramids; it will be the pride and joy of Po'keepsie, an honor to the state and a blessing to the world" (Vasser "Hall of Presidents"). Whether it is fact or myth is unclear, but it was not for the future of women, but the memory of a man that Vassar describes this founding impulse. Regardless of the true impetus for establishing the college, this is the origin story recognized by Vassar and its alumnae. It is in this setting of grandeur – but for whom? – at the

prestigious women's college that Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy would begin their college education.

It was not Mathew Vassar and Milo P. Jewett alone who believed that women's education could be seen as a direct benefit to men first and foremost. It was often the case in the early years of such institutions that women's colleges were seen as a benefit to society insofar as they might benefit men: "Advocates of higher education for women who subscribed to this view argued that the benefits would be manifold: the husbands of educated women would be more virtuous, their children would be educated to civic responsibility, and the society as a whole would be elevated" (Nash 16). It was an idea that persevered, and would still be reflected in the slang term for women's undergraduate degrees – the MRS – and the idea that a woman was going to college to find a husband, not get a B.A..

A bachelor's degree for women in the 1930s was a pursuit reserved, for the most part, for the highly privileged, and came with no guarantee of employment. While that is not to say there were no professional women in 1930s America, rampant gender discrimination was not wiped away with the ability to declare oneself in possession of a "B.A." – and in the tight 1930s Great Depression economy that meant jobs were hard for men to procure, there were certainly even fewer for women. This was a trend that would only be reversed when World War II required men to leave their jobs in order to fight.

When Vassar was founded in 1861, it was established as one of the Seven Sister Colleges, now referred to as the Seven Siblings due to several having become coeducational, a consortium of women's colleges that offered a space for women to come together and earn a college degree in a country that would continue to deny them the right to vote, hold most jobs that required a

college degree, or open a bank account in their own name for decades. By the time Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy were enrolled students at the institution in the early 1930s, women had won the right to just ten years earlier – the 19th Amendment was passed in 1919 and ratified in 1920 – the Great Depression was at its height making jobs nearly impossible to find, and a bank account for women would remain out of reach for over forty more years.

In the 1953 Vassar College News Bulletin, issued to commemorate twenty years since the class of '33 graduated (Mary McCarthy's class), marriage, and the marital statues of the graduates, features prominently. Inside the yellow covers decorated with black ink line drawings of "Vassar Girls," the first line of the bulletin states "the last member of the Daisy Chain got married a few weeks ago" (Jessup 1).[4] The bulletin goes on to break down the marriage rates of the Class of '33 under the subheading of "Better to Marry than Burn" (Jessup 5). Although the subheading is self-consciously sarcastic, the content of the section of it is not, and earnestly discusses the percentages of marriages and children within the Class of '33 and tries to draw conclusions from those data points – are those with three children happier than those with two? How does the woman with eight feel? It is the women's value, in relation to men, that is prized as the information with which to open the bulletin commemorating twenty years since graduation – a telling statistic coming from an all-women's college. It serves as a reminder that while both Rukeyser and McCarthy attended the college as students dedicated to the study of literature, the collegiate culture was by no means immune from the socio-political pressures imposed on women: that their primary value can be located in marriage and motherhood.[5] If the aim of their

[4] The 'Daisy Chain' is a Vassar tradition established in 1894 in which a pre-selected group of girls chosen for both their looks and intellect carry a several feet long garland of daisies at commencement. The tradition continues today but was updated in 1969 to no longer consider appearance (Vassar Blogpost).

[5] For their own contribution to the statistics, McCarthy married four times, and had one son, Reuel Wilson; Rukeyser never married, but had one son, William Rukeyser, whom she raised as a single mother.

Vassar education was to make well-rounded and informed young women, the alumni reunion bulletin makes clear what the goal of that prized well-rounded education is: not a career or continued engagement with rigorous intellectual discourse but instead marriage and children.

It is here that Mary McCarthy begins her most famous work: published in 1963, *The Group*, a novel set in the years 1933 to 1940, narrates the lives of eight friends who just graduated from Vassar as they settle into their adulthoods. The novel opens immediately after their graduation and follows their lives up until the majority of them are married, one has become a mother, and one has died. Intertwined with being a college student at this time are inherent contradictions: college in the 1930s is a place of exclusivity reserved for the privileged, a fact especially true for the consortium of colleges to which Vassar belonged. In addition to these women's colleges being reserved for the daughters of wealthy families, exclusion based on race was also a significant source of exclusion and racism embedded into these communities. Vassar did not admit an openly Black student until 1940 (Vassar Quarterly).[6] Alongside institutions like Vassar, historically black all women's colleges were also being founded, most famously, Spellman in 1881.

But colleges like Vassar, were also the place that, it was advertised, to gain an understanding of the world. Did this mean only a fortunate – wealthy and white – few could truly understand the world? Rukeyser and McCarthy had the privileged burden placed upon them that receiving a college education meant the expectation that they would *do* something in the world with that exclusive education. And for both of them, that something would not entail becoming homemakers raising the next generation, but for many female graduates, as the bulletin details, it

---

[6] Anita Hemmings, who passed as white, graduated Vassar in 1897 (Vassar Quarterly).

would. And the same would be true for the fictional graduates of *The Group.* As the novel charts their lives in the years following graduation, the reader witnesses as each of the eight members of the group grapple with what that exact contribution to society might be.

It is the notion of, and belief in, progress which McCarthy locates as the center of this burden. In notes collected in the archive about the process of writing the novel, McCarthy reflects that the idea for it, "grew out of my preoccupation with what is now called quality of life. It seemed to me that there was a great deterioration of standards…and that this was connected with a loss of feeling for reality in its simplest, homeliest forms. The source, as I saw it, was the idea of progress. This idea was a kind of religion based on faith in machines as superior to the human hand and body" (McCarthy "On the Writing"). Progress is presented as a positive, certainly when compared with its antonym, there can be no question that progress is prized while regression is to be avoided. But progress too, and specifically the expectation for it, can be a negative and in pursuit of its great promised heights can be the ultimate destruction. This is the idea that Walter Benjamin famously captures in his writing on the Angel of History inspired by the Paul Klee *Angelus Novus* painting – an angel so enamored with moving forward that they forget to tend to the destruction and wreck of their past building up. It is a similar idea McCarthy identifies as an underlying thesis to Vassar's educational model and its impact on the individual women who attempt to live up to this promise.

But McCarthy is not only writing about Vassar graduates, she too is one herself. In a letter written after the novel's publication, to *The Group*'s Danish translator, McCarthy reflected on her own relationship to Vassar and the ways in which it influenced the narrative. She writes,

> I did not immediately think of Vassar. But soon it struck me that I could locate the source of the infection [a faith in progress] there, partly because Vassar had formed me (and I had not been immune, when young, to all those shibboleths

> taken as gospel) and partly because Vassar had always prided itself on being the most advanced among the women's colleges…so it was unfair, in a way, to Vassar to use its own sharp weapons to assault some it is most dearly held beliefs." (McCarthy "On The Writing Of")

It is in this way that she tells her narrative from the inside. While a work of fiction, and not a piece of journalism, she utilizes her memories of being a Vassar student as the basis upon which to conceptualize and critique this idea of progress, and in doing so invokes the genres of journalism along with that of memoir and realist drama to make her point. The blend of genres lends a tone of authority to the novel: she treats her fiction with the weight of fact. As scholar Deborah Nelson writes, "In the early 1960's, McCarthy would draw together journalism, and two of its aesthetic cousins, the novel and the realist drama, closer together in order to differentiate them, giving to the arts generally the more rigorous relationship to facts and to their properties of unpredictability and alteration" (Nelson 85). McCarthy's ruthless interrogation of these eight young women's lives is bold. Rather than letting the fact that the novel is a work of fiction serve as a veil over these women's lives, she emphasizes early in the novel that the reader can accompany the characters anywhere they might go: they know this to be true when McCarthy relates in detail Dottie's first visit to the gynecologist for birth control.

Crucially, unlike *The Book of the Dead*, which was written in the same moment as the event itself was occuring, *The Group* was written retrospectively; while the plot occurs at the same time, in 1930s America as it reels from the Great Depression, it was written over the course of eleven years from 1952 until it was published in 1963. Where *The Book of the Dead* is self-consciously aware of contributing to what will become a history, a past, and a memory, *The Group* resurrects what is already the past. As an semi-autobiographical narrative, McCarthy employs "materials of the past [that] are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs

of the present consciousness" (Eakin 56). The novel allows McCarthy to question the self-understandings of women of her generation during this pivotal period in American history (the 1930s) with the benefit of critical hindsight.

We can understand a foundational question in *The Group* to be: when history and fiction converge, where does the truth lie? The potency of this question comes into particular focus when we also consider the historical actors at the center of McCarthy's inquiry: women. The stereotype of gossip, which carries with it connotations of unreliability, are closely tied to women and their social networks. The foundation of *The Group* is a female social circle, but instead of critiquing the reliability of women's meaning making, McCarthy incorporates the varied nature of gossip as a truth of its own. Even the most factual events of the novel are left to readerly interpretation dependent on the correct reading of which characters are reliable and which are not. After the novel's publication, McCarthy wrote about which characters she deemed deceitful, and which were to be believed. She writes "Libby [was] established as ill-meaning and a liar," meanwhile she refers to Polly Andrews as "who we know to be trustworthy" (McCarthy "Masters Thesis"). McCarthy writes that correctly deciphering which characters are to be trusted is the key to "the correct interpretation" of her novel, thus she includes the reader in the process of meaning making and in parsing out the true history of these women's lives. The reader, in a sense, is incorporated into the social circle and by extension recruited to participate in the network of gossip and rumors in order to piece together the events of the novel.

McCarthy writes in greater detail about her narrative style in a letter to the Danish translator of *The Group.* She offers a literary comparison, noting,

> There is no stream of consciousness in *The Group*. It is the opposite from the Joycean internal monologue or note-taking of sensations and thought-fragments ...There is the minimum of sensation in The Group; the perceptual field is almost

> nil. It is all talk. As if everything that was happening has immediately to be converted into a kind of specie or currency, which could be spent or hoarded (usually spent). (McCarthy, letter to Hertel, 1964)

This idea of a social currency embedded within the novel that the reader themselves must engage with in order to comprehend the narrative illuminates McCarthy's intention that the reader not be passive; the reader figuratively is the point at which the social circle joins – they make the ring whole with their participation. It is this inherently enigmatic nature of history in everyday usage which Trouillot writes on. He writes, "The vernacular use of the word history thus offers us a semantic ambiguity: an irreducible distinction and yet an equally irreducible overlap between what happened and that which is said to have happened" (Trouillot 3). McCarthy's *The Group* resides precisely in this inbetween space. The women are the actors in the novel, but they are also the narrators when they take on the responsibility of gossiping and sharing rumors about a supposed event in their social group. In this way, it is the latter form of history – "that which is said to have happened" – that is the history that truly advances the plot forward.

Rebelling: Con Spirito

Before McCarthy and Rukeyser were authors, they were editors. During their college years they worked together to found the anonymous, and independently run, student literary magazine *Con Spirito*. McCarthy had intended for it to be a "rebel literary magazine" from the outset, and at some point during the formation of its editorial board, fellow literature major Muriel Rukeyser joined the editorial team (McCarthy HIG 257). This magazine is not only the one moment in their lives which the archives and historical records point to definitively as an active collaboration between the two women, but with the creation of this magazine also came,

in many ways, Rukeyser's and McCarthy's first introduction to controversy – a noun that would follow both of them throughout their lives.

The small magazine, *Con Spirito,* was published anonymously, and as McCarthy remembers it in her memoirs, that simple act sparked outrage on campus. McCarthy recalls in *How I Grew,* that "*Con Spirito* was my first encounter with 'motiveless malignity'" (McCarthy HIG 258). McCarthy and Rukeyser were both involved with the literature magazine, which published student written essays and poetry. It was not the content, but rather the anonymity of its authors which appeared to create the campus-wide controversy. McCarthy writes, "our magazine, which we advertised by posters we nailed up on trees in the dark of night, contained nothing libelous or obscene, attacked no person by name or insinuation, was wll printed, inexpensive (15 cents), in other words, incapable of harming anyone, but it was met [...] by a tide of hatred. Because it was unsigned" (McCarthy HIG 258). It would be perhaps the only time in their respective careers as writers that they would receive backlash to their work *because* their name was absent from it.

In the following decades, Rukeyser and McCarthy would pioneer a form of documentary poetry and literature that often contended with anonymous or invisible histories for their subject matter, but they themselves never wrote from a place of anonymity as narrators of those stories. But the college literary magazine was the one exception to that rule. As McCarthy remembered the sole critique was the anonymity: "That was the outrage, the shameful crime, treated as such even by some faculty, who breathed the word 'anonymous' as though it were married to the word 'letter,' denoting something so scurrilous that it dared not sign its name. We were reviled as cowards since we did not come forward to claim our publication" (McCarthy 258). McCarthy

does not mention a reason for why they, as students, had decided publishing the magazine anonymously was important, other than her original mention that from the start the magazine was conceived of as “rebellious,” and Rukeyser does not write about the experience; but, the incident serves as an example of the ways in which even Rukeyser and McCarthy’s earliest writings were an attempt as defying the norms, and were in turn met with a backlash.

As the 1932-1933 academic year came to a close, Mary McCarthy would graduate, as expected, four years after enrolling. Muriel Rukeyser, though, would drop out that year – perhaps fittingly for a woman whose oeuvre of work would lack completion too, as we will see in the next chapter. She would spend the next year as a journalist for left leaning magazines and enroll in an anthropology course being offered at Columbia, although she would never formally earn a bachelor's degree from any institution. Amongst the fictional characters of *The Group*, who thrive on social gossip, the news of one of their own dropping out would surely be a topic for conversation, just as, no doubt, it was in real life at the time. The historical record, though, is silent as to what may have been the reason behind Rukeyser’s decision to depart from Vassar early. The modern day researcher can only speculate.

CHAPTER III

A Moment of Proof[7]

"What is the use of truth? Is not truth the end? Or has it no human use, does it lead to nothing? The use of truth is its communication."

-Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry,* 1949

Unlike some of the literary giants of the 20th century, Muriel Rukeyser's writing is not readily available in bookstores or routinely included in college class syllabi. Instead, the vast bulk of her work remains in the archive, unpublished and largely unread. Muriel Rukeyser died in 1980, sixty-six years after her birth in the same city, New York, at the apartment of her longtime partner, and publishing agent, Monica McCall. One gets the sense that rather than her work having been completed, it has remained indefinitely paused in the intervening forty-four years since her death. Hanging suspended in the archival manila folders scattered, primarily, along the East Coast – some in the New York Public Library Collections, some in upstate New York in the Vassar Archives, and the majority in Washington DC at the Library of Congress – are essays, poetry, and project abstracts that together form Rukeyser's view of the unrealized potential bound up within mid-century America.

Absent from her career is the large-scale recognition we so often associate with the winding down of a magnificent body of work. Rather than a legacy of renown, the consistent reaction to her work was suspicion: Rukeyser was under surveillance by the Federal Bureau of

[7] Please note this chapter contains detailed analysis of a fictional character's possible suicide and the impacts it has on others.

Investigation for much of her life (a fact she only learned near the end). There is no metaphorical conclusion with which her decades of work can be neatly bookended. Mary McCarthy received some of the more traditional accolades – winning the National Medal for Literature in 1984 – of a celebrated author; and she achieved more popular success than Rukeyser ever did. But with her success also came scathing criticism of a particularly personal nature – a type of criticism that rarely existed for her male counterparts, let alone influenced the reception of their work to the degree that it did for her.

Mary McCarthy's work may have received greater lasting recognition then did Rukeyser's, but recognition is not the same as comprehension, and it was often the case that McCarthy's work, specifically *The Group,* her most acclaimed work, was frequently received – and ridiculed – as a gossipy immoral tell-all of the upper-class intellectual social set to which she belonged. In Norman Mailer's review of the novel at the time of its publication, he referred to McCarthy as a "witch" and summarized the plot of the novel as "she found a Dauphin at last in the collective masculinity which is to be scraped together out of eight Vassar girls, class of '33" (Mailer). McCarthy's familiarity with the real life subjects, upon whom her fictional characters are based, was regarded not as an asset but instead as evidence of its triviality – her own familiarity with the subject, instead of being viewed as a form of expertise, served to discredit the legitimacy of her work. It was a critique that her contemporary, J.D. Salinger – who also wrote novels about young well-off adolescents and college students navigating the transition into adulthood – never received.

There is often a certain passivity assigned to the act of forgetting – something that happens unintentionally – but the act of forgetting is just as much a verb of action as is the act of

remembering. Rather than forgive and forget, the mantra of Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy is to embrace and remember, but the same is not done for their work. Their writing is radical in terms of political commitments but also radical for a specific dedication to telling the truth as each saw it: radical for how they handle their subject matter – whether that of a young college girl having sex or using birth control for the first time, or that of the worst construction disaster in American history. They are read as politically radical for their unrelenting dedication to a feminist perspective, and striking commentary on American society, but their work is also radical because of its lack of conclusion. This chapter then is an attempt at a theorizing of incompleteness in women's writing. There are two elements of incompleteness in their work. One comes from within, organically, and is the intentional lack of conclusion within their texts to suggest a fluid relationship of time between past, present, and future. We can understand their use of this narrative device to be an extension of their narrative approach to history. Such resistance to completion opens a nuanced discussion of American life and values: to conclude, to punctuate their narratives with a definite end would be in opposition to the focus on history, evidence, and narration both McCarthy and Rukeyser reimagine in their writing. As Rukeyser asks, "what is the use of truth?" – in order for the truth to be useful it must continue to be used, it cannot end (Rukeyser LP 27).

The word "incomplete" itself is imbued with a negative connotation – not a quality on its own but instead a negation of "complete," the word conjures up a sense of failure, a failure to reach an intended or natural end. But a definite end is antithetical to the tradition of feminist thought Rukeyser and McCarthy are writing in – their work intentionally excavates lives and voices that are not – in the case of Rukeyser, quite literally – front page news. They write with

the hope that their work will transfer the past into the future. Their work must end on a note that hopes for a future rather than summarizes the past then; their work asks, is not truth, rather than a temporally imposed end, the true end?

The second element of incompleteness in their work is an external one, imposed on their writing because of the socio-political climate which they were – and continue to be – situated within. Their politics, the topic of their writing, the form their writing took, their religion, and in Rukeyser's case, her sexual orientation, but most commonly for both simply their gender, can be directly connected to how their work was, and was not, received and integrated into American letters then or now. For Rukeyser, this often meant facing significant obstacles when searching to publish her work, a fact that left her financially precarious for most of her life (Kennedy-Epstein). For McCarthy, this attempt to prematurely silence her was often translated into the harsh criticism she received from critics and every-day readers once her work was out in the world. The systematic way in which their work was disregarded and or critiqued means that an element of incompleteness was imposed on their work in a far different way than the one that occurs within their work. Instead of leaving room for an expansive future, the reductive and dismissive reception of their work by critics, thereby excluding their work from being placed in the same league as the writings of their male contemporaries, is a limitation that scholars engaging with their work must consciously work around. Indeed it is this very dynamic that Rukeyser scholar Rowena Kennedy-Epstein locates as her starting point for her book on Rukeyser, *Unfinished Spirit: Muriel Rukeyser's Twentieth Century.* Thus, the lack of completion in their work is both a source of limitation as well as invitation in their writing to readers to

grapple with this internal logic of non-completion as well as to critics coming to terms with literary histories that do not include either writer.

In order to understand what traditions their writings eschew, it is important to consider the context in which they are situated and the way in which we, in the twenty-first century, are able to enter into their work. Perhaps their work falls naturally into the pattern of literary work that draws upon historical research in the present day, but that was not the condition under which they were writing. Historicist criticism and scholarly research was not dominant in mid-century American literature. The formalist literary theory, New Criticism, was at its peak during both Rukeyser's and McCarthy's writing careers, and was actively opposed to reading literature in historical context, arguing instead that a piece of literature should be entirely self-contained and self-referential (Brooks 593). It is not a coincidence that so much of their work – being topical and responsive to historical events as they unfolded in their own time, for Rukeyser especially, remains unpublished in the archive.

The ways in which we understand Rukeyser and McCarthy's contributions to 20th century intellectual discourses is inseparably bound up in their gender. In their writing, both fluidly rotate through personas: witness, historian, archivist, school-girl, even their relationship with their respective religious identities was fluid for both throughout their lives, but the identity of being a woman was fixed. It was an identity they wrote proudly from, but it was also that same identity that critics attempted to use as a weapon against them, when they were dismissively referred to as "women-poets" (New York Quarterly). Their gender identities were further impacted by the fact that each was a young woman educated at an elite institution of women's education, Vassar College, one of the Seven Sisters schools founded in the nineteenth century. As women, and

educated women, they had access to opportunities unavailable to many of their peers (Langdon 14). This impacted how they were perceived and how their work was received. Rukeyser scholar Rowena Kennedy-Epstein writes "In examining Rukeyser's vast archive of unfinished texts, one finds there is no way to understand the erasure of so much of her work without understanding how gender functioned at the inception and in the reception of women's writing during the Cold War, and how that informs our own thinking about gender and texts today" (Kennedy-Epstein 3). While their conscious positioning of their gender within their work is a self-conscious strength, the world in which they were writing did not reflect or acknowledge that as such.

Both began their adulthoods in the interim years between the two World Wars, and while they could not know exactly that the Second World War would come, to the politically aware, life in the 1930s certainly offered no sense of stability. The Great Depression would destroy the national, and international, economy as they entered college, and even though World War Two had yet to commence, it would already be more than clear that *the war to end all wars* had failed to provide such a sought after conclusion; instead, life was more accurately a series of "in-betweens" – of multiplicities and contradictions, and very little control. This was true of their personal lives as well: Rukeyser would drop out of college, and Mary McCarthy would find herself married the same month she graduated college, a decision she regretted instantly. Abroad, Adolf Hitler and Francisco Franco rose to power joining fellow dictators, Benito Mussolini and Joseph Stalin, who had been in power since the early 1920s. The global struggle between capitalism, communism, and authoritarianism, long a tension, was at the forefront of political discussions. As the world careened towards another war, Rukeyser and McCarthy wrote about

people who refused to be passive; it follows then that neither could they occupy the role of after the fact observer either: their writing, as were they, was of the time.

Their work engages in the process of meaning-making in the moment; they document their present with an awareness of its future as a moment of the past. Whether or not to attribute that sense of urgency to the political precarity they lived through, or the systems of (gendered, racialized) knowledge they saw being devalued around them, both writers understood there to be a connection between historical events and their own sense that meaning was under threat is clear: "During the war, we felt the silence in the policy of the governments of English-speaking countries. That policy was to win the war first, and work out meanings afterward. The result was, of course, that the meanings were lost. You cannot put these things off" (Rukeyser LP 20). Both Rukeyser and McCarthy were engaged in the dual process of commemoration or communication and living simultaneously; they could not, as women, as Americans, as writers, afford to let time pass – their writing was in and of the moment. A sense of precarity and urgency permeates their work. But in a culture where the norm is to write after the fact, what happens when the after arrives but the writing has already been written?

In any work, the questions of structural narrative, and temporal progression perhaps come most prominently, and unavoidably, to the fore in the conclusion. The conclusion is essentially a moment of pause – on what note is the author choosing to conclude the narrative and what is the sense of future that they envision for their subject matter? Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy are not alone in their inability to come to an conclusion: one of the most famous pioneering feminist authors across the Atlantic, Virgina Woolf, writing just a decade before they began publishing, opens her feminist manifesto *A Room of One's Own*, first delivered in 1928 as

lectures to undergraduates being educated at Newnham and Girton, women's colleges at Cambridge University, with the commentary that she would not be able to reach a conclusion on the topic upon which she was asked to speak. In her opening paragraph, Woolf states:

> I should never be able to come to a conclusion. I should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece forever. All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved. I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these two questions—women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems. (Woolf AROO 1)

As Woolf herself states, it is traditional, and expected, that a lecture, or any form of directed piece of writing with a central argument should be able to conclude. Yet, to conclude in this case would be to close a discussion so rarely even started. In the context of the "unsolved problems" of which she speaks, Woolf appears to equate a conclusion with *solved* problems, but that is not the condition under which she is engaging with these themes. *A Room of One's Own*'s status as a revolutionary manifesto holds that position precisely because it is unlike the writings that came before it; rather than building off a well established precedent of published women's feminist thought, it forces open a space and a discussion where before there was none. *A Room of One's Own* is no less a manifesto for its lack of conclusion, or single summarizable decisive statement on the topics of women and fiction. Rather it is an opening and expansion of questions worthy of further consideration, the writing's lack of conclusion is instead an invitation: an invitation for future feminist thought. The very conditions in which *A Room of One's Own* was written and delivered anticipated the intellectual formation of the writers at the center of this study. It is out of this feminist tradition then, I argue, that we can understand Rukeyser and McCarthy's work.

When asked to summarize what her forthcoming novel, *The Group,* would be about in an interview with *The Paris Review* conducted two years before it was published, she remarked that it was "easy" to summarize it simply as "it's a novel about the idea of progress, really. The idea of progress seen in the female sphere, the feminine sphere. You know, home economics, architecture, domestic technology, contraception, childbearing; the study of technology in the home, in the playpen, in the bed. It's supposed to be the history of the loss of faith in progress, in the idea of progress, during that twenty-year period" (Sifton). Progress, then, is ultimately a beginning, not an end, and it is this space the *The Group* inhabits.

The Spiral

Mary McCarthy died in 1989. Of her multiple autobiographical writings, *How I Grew*, published in 1986, just three years before her death, is perhaps most striking for her choice of focus. In the book, she focuses on her childhood years from the age of thirteen to twenty-one, it is in these eight defining years that she locates the central themes of her life. *How I Grew* ends at what is ostensibly a "natural" conclusion, a standard demarcation of time in a young person's life: the graduation from college. But McCarthy includes the entirety of her life in that moment, and with that end comes a critical beginning: her first marriage. The book closes with McCarthy, in bed and panicking, next to her fast asleep new husband. It is the final, and particularly poignant, example of an evident theme throughout. To demarcate periods of time with the terms "beginning," "middle," or "end" would be to lose the quality McCarthy's writing is in earnest pursuit of: an as realistic as possible recollection of her past. Living in the present moment, we are not aware of temporal boundaries until they are behind us. Her writing, in its first-hand documentary nature, cannot be either. Philosopher Walter Benjamin writes of this very concept in

his 1943 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," when he says, "No fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years" (Benjamin 208). Time in her writing lacks a linear structure because the events she recounts are accounts of living time, not posthumous time.

McCarthy further emphasizes this point when in the same memoir she recounts her senior year experience in the months leading up to her graduation and marriage. It is a traditional struggle of narrative she identifies: how do you account for multiple events occurring at once? Her memoir has a quality of dual awareness; it is both dedicated to the subjectively truthful telling of her past, while also bringing a meta-awareness to the present act of structuring her past that McCarthy as narrator is engaging in. She writes of the people and events that were occupying her days, while also wondering how all of those events could occur at once. She writes,

> Senior year was a peculiar mixture; several streams of experience ran through it, independently and as though oblivious of each other, like in one of those 'histo-maps,' colored pin, yellow, pale blue, green, showing the rise and fall of cultures. There was John [her fiance], there was the group in the Tower, there was Miss Sandison's Renaissance seminar – we did *The Faerie Queene* that year. There was the *Con Spirito* stream, with Frani and Elizabeth Bishop, Muriel Rukeyser and the Clark Sisters…There were other streams that felt like torrents but that eventually dried up…It is hard to describe these individual trains of experience while keeping to a linear narrative, and it must have been hard, also, to live them side by side, all at the same time…Perhaps senior year is when everything comes together before, once again, separating. (McCarthy HIG 251-252)

McCarthy brings a simultaneous awareness to her work as an of-the-moment subject and retrospective narrator. Her work echoes the tone of a diary, capturing a living thought not yet concluded or fixed as a "fact," yet still worthy of contemplation. But what differentiates McCarthy's work from that of a diary is the mark of intentionality. This work lacks completion

not because it is a series of fleeting thoughts, but rather because she is consciously writing in rejection in regards to the idea of assumed progression in history. It is in this way that her work is reminiscent of the diary – that genre of writing that straddles the public and private, that is written in the moment and yet becomes unavoidably an archive for the future. And perhaps most notably, we neither expect, nor impose, an overarching narrative on a diary.

It is with these conceptions of the diary in mind that I turn to theorists of the genre to help understand the particular narrative framework within which McCarthy's are situated. While her work is not a diary, and so lacks the original spontaneity or irregularity closely associated with the genre, her autobiographical writing can be understood to be a version of the genre, and heavily influenced by it. It is the diary where some of the earliest instances of women narrating their own lives occur, and the form is a natural intersection for the individual specificity of personal life merging with the historical and public political sphere. To summarize the genre: "The diary's valorization of the detail, its perspective, of immersion, its mixing of genres, its principle of inclusiveness, and its expression of intimacy and mutuality all seem to qualify it as a form very congenial to women life/writers" (Newman 105). It is in this way that the positionality of her gender is embedded into structural ways in which she recounts her past. McCarthy assumes the mode of diary-memoir to write *to* and *in* the moment – even if it is an artificial construct for a memoir all told in retrospect.

McCarthy employs a similar such temporal narrative approach of inhabiting one moment both presently and retroactively in her most well known novel: *The Group* (1963) concludes with Kay's death and funeral, with the seven surviving members of the group mourning her loss. A funeral feels like the most quintessential and definite of ends – McCarthy credits a friend coming

up to her after hearing a draft saying, “You begin with a wedding, you must end with a funeral” as the catalyst for this arc – and would seem like a stark deviation from the element of incompleteness in her other writing (McCarthy “On the Writing”). The symbolism of a wedding as a definite beginning and a funeral as a definite end though can be misleading, instead I argue that McCarthy uses these classic metaphorical time markers to subversively disrupt the traditional flow of time and narrative arc. She makes light of them for simply what they are: *markers* of ritual and tradition, *not* concrete boundaries that interrupt or order the flow of time.

Kay’s death is relayed to the reader retroactively, the first mention of it the reader hears is her funeral, not the death itself. The first sentence of Chapter 15, the final one, serves more as a conclusion for the previous chapter until the final clause, which introduces the new information: “she did not see Norine again till Kay’s funeral” (McCarthy TG 338). The friend group is already gathered around her body preparing it for the funeral and burial by the time the reader is introduced to the event, what then follows is a relaying of what previously occurred from multiple group member’s perspectives, but crucially, never from the perspective of either an objective narrator or Kay herself. Kay, the reader learns, died from “hurtling” out from a window on the twentieth floor of the Vassar Club in New York City, where she was staying (McCarthy TG 340). It is Kay’s wedding that opens the novel, and the first one in the friend group, and what follows is a traumatic and abusive marriage that unravels over the course of the book ending in divorce. McCarthy has provided the reader plenty of cause for them to rationalize Kay’s death as a suicide, but never once says it is – it is only Libby, a character previously deemed unreliable – who inquires as to whether or not Kay may have jumped: “Now girls…tell me. I won’t tell a soul. Did she jump or fall?’” (McCarthy TG 342). It is never stated with objective certainty that

she fell though, either; there cannot be certainty with such an accident, nobody was with her when it happened.

After publication, the narrative that Kay fell accidentally is the one, McCarthy writes, that she intended. In response to a masters student's thesis on *The Group*, construing Kay's death as suicide, McCarthy replies definitively, "Kay does not jump; she falls" (McCarthy Masters Thesis). McCarthy understands this misinterpretation on the part of readers to be perhaps due to the readerly desire for a predictable or conventional ending. She writes, "As an author, I am mystified by the fact that so many readers seem to want to think she jumped. Why this desire? Is it a dislike for having a sheer accident end a novel?" (McCarthy Masters Thesis). There is something about a suicide, as harrowing an event as it is, that readers are able to rationalize and interpret as a premeditated and intentional end – it follows a conventional social script. As literary scholar Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes in *Writing Beyond the Ending,* "Any social convention like a 'script,' which suggests sequences of action and response, the meaning we give these, and the ways of organizing experience by choices, emphases, priorities…No convention is neutral, purely mimetic, or purely aesthetic" (DuPlessis 2). By removing the expected response – Kay committing suicide – from the narrated action – Kay's abusive marriage – McCarthy removes any sense of achieving a definite end point or resolution of the multiple plot lines of the novel.

This action remains indefinite, not capable of being resolved, and it is left to the reader to experience this discomfort. The shock accident cuts through the narrative of depression and abuse, and while it ends Kay's life, it does not conclude Harold's, Kay's now ex-husband's, nor does it conclude the lives of her friends. Her death is shocking precisely because of everyone

else's *living*, it interrupts the continuous narrative progression into the future, and serves as a signal for what all of the friend's eventual ends will be even if the reader does not bear witness to "what really happened." Her death is not *the* death, but rather, the *first* death, immediately putting her death in relation to the inevitable future. The death makes clear the distinction between Kay's *life*, which is ended with her death, and Kay's *story*, which remains incomplete precisely because of that death. Through the accident, McCarthy demonstrates that just because an end occurs does not mean that a sense of understanding has been achieved; perhaps the same could be said for the end – the graduation – that precedes the start of the novel. How does an author "end" a story about a group, in any case, rather than an individual or protagonist?

Rukeyser in Retrospect

As I have argued earlier in this project, a point of origin supposes a linear narrative of history that will inherently prioritize certain narratives and exclude others. The concept of "conclusion" supports a similar structure: to punctuate the narrative with a definitive end is to mark a firm boundary between past and present. Rukeyser's work argues directly against such a conception of history. As she remarked in a 1968 address to students at Scripps College in Claremont California, entitled "Poetry and the Unverifiable Fact": she told the assembled audience, "I belong to a society of historians, but I have had nothing to do with them since they defined history, a historic event, as an event which is finished, since it seems to me that these events, like the events in poetry, live in the present" (Rukeyser, MRE, 253). It is this fluid approach to time that dominates her work and the lens through which she makes her arguments about poetry and history again and again.

The penultimate chapter of *The Life of Poetry*, the book in which she outlines what she sees as the place of poetry in mid-century American life, is composed of forty-two snapshots of, and meditations on, Rukeyser's childhood growing up in New York City. It is telling that as her investigation into the purpose and place of poetry in American life is ostensibly winding down, she does not conclude, but instead returns to the beginning – her own beginning. The text, written in the first person throughout, but not quite so intimately personal until this final section, structurally takes the form of the cyclical spiral she writes about: "The spiral [is] the life-giver and carrier, the whirlpool, the vortex of atoms, and the sacred circuit…The symbol then asked the question, or declared the existence, of the problem of the relationship of movement with life" (Rukeyser 37-38). She writes that she understands life to figuratively take this shape, and so as she reaches the conclusion of a book about poetry in the national context of America, she concludes on her own (intimate and personal) beginning. She writes, "I learned that I had been brought up as a protected, blindfolded daughter, who might have finally learned some road other than that between school and home, but who knew nothing of people, New York, or herself. Everything was to be begun; not only that, but unlearned, and then at last begun" (Rukeyser LP 205). Rukeyser responds rather differently to the "school" experience than Mary McCarthy does. McCarthy takes an almost sociological approach to her graduates in The Group while Rukeyser wants to depart from the "road" between "school and home."

One's Own Time

What did it mean to confront history as a woman writer in this time and how did education either support or complicate this work? Woolf herself never attended university and often described her position as that of an "educated man's daughter" (Woolf TGS 51). As Woolf

would further cement in her book length essay, *Three Guineas*, a sequel of sorts to *A Room of One's Own*, and one in which she further expands upon a women's place within writing, history, and the world at large, she writes, "history and biography when questioned would seem to show that her position in the home of freedom has been different from her brother's; and psychology would seem to hint that history is not without its effect upon the mind and body" (Woolf TGS 9). It is out of foundational feminist writings like these out of which we can understand Rukeyser's and McCarthy's writing evolving. History, and the ways it has been experienced differently depending on the subject's positionality is a throughline through both of their writings. But it is also within these constructs of history and one's relationality to it, that Rukeyser and McCarthy are themselves writing, and in turn, how their writing is remembered.

While the New Critics argue that we must understand literature as an isolated text, at the end of her life, Rukeyser's work remained unfinished. Engaging with Rukeyser's writing in the 21st century, also requires acknowledging and considering the broader context in which it must be studied: as Kennedy-Epstein argues in the conclusion of her book *Unfinished Spirit: Muriel Rukeyser's Twentieth Century*, to fully recover Rukeyser and her oeuvre of work from obscurity, considering the circumstances in which she wrote as an author is an imperative. Kennedy-Epstein writes, "Rukeyser's recuperation is dependent on our total reevaluation of gendered and racialized literary traditions that normalize the undervaluing of the efficacy of women writers' aesthetic choices and theoretical expertise. It also depends on undoing the biases that undermine our acceptance of women scholars as experts on their subjects" (Kennedy-Epstein 163). The work that now resides in the archive – whether it be in the basement of the Vassar Library in Poughkeepsie, New York, or housed within the main branch of the New

York Public Library on 5th Avenue – these legacies and traditions of their work that now resides in the archive must be understood.

Rather than seeing it as a personal failing to write something legible or formally complete, I would suggest we take seriously the form in which Rukeyser's writings are available to us. Rukeyser scholar Rowena Kennedy-Epstein suggests a different approach that finds meaning in miscellany itself: "The unfinished work – messy, fragmented, diffuse, hard to read, found in miscellany folders, in a folder in someone else's archive – is, I think, the condition of women's writing, and women's lives to a large extent" (Kennedy-Epstein 167). As a writer, Rukeyser spent her life, in many ways, contending with such archives in her texts; "Rukeyser saw great potential in the debris, in the archives, and lost narratives of history" (Kennedy-Epstein 87). Now, it is left to the scholars of Rukeyser to comprehend her own archive.

It is crucial that a lack of conclusion not be misinterpreted as a lack of certainty. Rather, I would propose, both writers consciously (and unconsciously) engage the lack of an ending as integral to their literary projects. There is both a sad absence in their lack of conclusion, but also a radical power; the lack of conclusion in Rukeyser and McCarthy's writing can also be viewed as a dedication to continuing, to persevering. Rukeseyer frequently summons and attempts to imagine the reader of her writing – "my one reader, you reading this book, who are you?" – (Rukeyser LP 189). This direct address reaches out to the reader, and includes them as a participant and collaborator in making meaning.

Both Rukeyser and McCarthy look to the historical and socio-political to inform the fictional narrative they plot, but they also understand the active reader to be actively engaging in meaning making, a turn to the archive then, is necessary. To look at the archives in scholarly

research to get a deeper historical understanding of the subject matter is not unusual, but I look to the Vassar archives specifically as parallel to both writers' decision to revisit their earlier lives as young women toward the end of their careers. I am "going back" to the past, *their* past, because they both pursued such a logic. One of the few Rukeyser correspondences housed in the Vassar archives is a short type-written letter from Rukeyser to the college librarian at the time, Fanny Borden, dated March 1942. It is about the series of lectures Rukeyser delivered at Vassar in the late '30s and early '40s entitled "The Usable Truth." The lectures would go on to form the basis of her book, *The Life of Poetry,* but at the time of her writing to Borden, the project was as yet unrealized and Rukeyser was searching for a publisher for the project. "I have been working on the book about Gibbs, which is just about to be finished, and then I should like to go over the lectures, of which only the first is now in completed form. I wonder whether Vassar Press would be interested in considering such a book – those five lectures, with an additional final paper – for publication" (Rukeyser 1942 letter). Fanny Borden's response, if there was one, is absent in the archives, but with the privilege of hindsight, we know the answer; even if a reply was never put into words, the answer was effectively the same: no. It would be another seven years before Rukeyser was successfully able to publish the collection, ultimately publishing it with Current Books – a press of eclectic tastes and lacking the prestige of Vassar – that would shut down seven years later.

While we cannot know the reason the Vassar publication never came to fruition, Rukeyser's creative pursuits frequently were declined as too experimental, or too communist in its values, or simply, too feminine: "There is no point in her career from the late thirties onward when the desire to control her own artistic processes doesn't run up against her often precarious

economic reality" (Kennedy-Epstein 59). In her work, Rukeyser pushes tirelessly at the bounds and boundaries of past, present, and future; but, her work is not only *of* these spacetimes but situated *within* them too. The reception of her work was often varied, but she was not willing to compromise on her ideals in order to be better received. Her approach instead was a dedication to remembering: "people do not forget, we, in our optimism say" (Rukeyser MRE 107).

When *The Life of Poetry* was reprinted by Paris Press in 1996 (the most recent edition and still in print today) a *New York Times* review opened with the casual observation that, after its initial printing in 1949, in the subsequent years the book had "spent more of its life out of print than in. But it has survived" (NYT 1997). Whether or not they knew it, the book-reviewer had alighted on a central issue of Rukeyser's work: in the years since her death her work has survived in spite of, not because of, publication. Her published writing comprises only a fraction of her output over her lifetime. As Kennedy-Epstein writes, "It should never be assumed that at any time the fraction of work that women have had published is at all representative of what they have actually produced. We need to move away from the assumption that publication confirms authorship, and that what is left incomplete in an archive confirms obscurity or unimportance" (Kennedy-Epstein 167). This project is based upon the same assumption. Texts such as these that remain tethered to moment(s) of creation in time even as they reflect on their own status as incomplete offer are what make women writers such as McCarthy and Rukeyser important to read in new ways.

Perhaps Rukeyser's refusal for there ever to be just one moment, one origin, or one story worth telling, can be most eloquently and succinctly noticed in two lines from her post-war thesis on poetry in American life, *The Life of Poetry.* On writing about the meaning-making nature of

poetry, Rukeyser suggests, “We wish to be told, in the most memorable way, what we have been meaning all along. This is a ritual moment, *a* moment of proof” (italics added, Rukeyser LP 26). It is her choice to use the indefinite article “a” rather than the definite “the” that quietly yet brilliantly underlines the point her decades of work strives to highlight: the choice, the proof, the evidence, the story in focus is but *one* of *many*. The moment of evidence is so frequently conceived of as a singular, and often ultimate, turning point, however her use of the indefinite “a” changes this formal structure and instead allows for a narrative in which evidence can be provided more than once, and multiple testimonies, and therefore, multiple truths, can co-exist. Evidence need not lead to one final conclusion, in other words, and Rukeyser's view of poetry and truth does not point in this direction.

Born into a society that judged them before they produced an ounce of work, for their weight,[8] their Jewishness[9], their gender, their childhoods, Rukeyser and McCarthy both resisted stepping into the mold of womanhood presented to them. Neither wrote formal histories or historical fiction but both engaged in their work with ideas about what counts as history and who is deemed worthy of being a historical actor and in doing so, their work defies conclusion too. Conclusion is the place of analysis, of understanding, and most of all, of peace. The conclusion is not the place for new arguments to occur, but Rukeyser and McCarthy were asked to convince

---

[8] In a 1965 letter, Rukeyser writes of “being fat”, and in her only novel (published posthumously, after a series of rejections during her lifetime) she writes of the experience of being a “big angry woman” (Kennedy-Epstein 1). In both instances the size of the *female* body is an experience she directly connects with how one is perceived and received by others. While McCarthy does not write about her own personal body in the world, on just the 4th page of *The Group,* ‘Pokey*’* Mary Prothero is introduced as “a fat cheerful New York society girl,” and nearly every time in which she plays a central role in the plot her weight is also mentioned (McCarthy TG 8). Both authors, whether writing from their personal experience or writing to create a character’s persona, make clear that while weight is a personal attribute, it directly influences how one is perceived.

[9] In addition Muriel Rukeyser being born and raised Jewish, while McCarthy was raised Catholic, one of her grandmothers was Jewish and she writes in her memoir *How I Grew*, about the necessity she felt it was in college to hide that information from her peers for fear of their anti-semtic outlooks: “By senior year I was well aware of having a Jewish grandmother and aware of it – let me be blunt – as something to hide” (McCarthy HIG 217).

until the end. Perhaps in a world that continually tried to punctuate their work, to cap it off, to stop their voices, their most radical act was to leave their own work end-less. The Rukeyser and McCarthy were afforded no such pause as a conclusion offers: instead the conversation continues. Now out of their archives. Now out of the women who followed after them: out of the novels of Toni Morrison and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and the political defiance of Angela Davis – authors and thinkers whose work defies being confused to linear structures of time, and instead actively engages with past, present and future at once. Whether the work of Rukeyser, the vulgar optimist, or McCarthy, the dedicated realist, their work was of a specific moment, but left for many future ones.

CONCLUSION

Everything I Have Written Has Had Something to Do with New York[10]

Carry abroad the urgent need, the scene,

To photograph and to extend the voice,

To speak this meaning.

-Muriel Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead,* 1936

In the summer of 2022, I spent two weeks in the Princeton University Archives researching Toni Morrison. It was the first time I was confronted with a very physical representation of the organization of history. Morrison's life and decades of work as editor, mother, prolific novelist, essayist, and political thinker were tidily organized into neatly labeled manila folders stored in gray archival boxes. As a visiting researcher, I was only allowed to view the contents of one folder at a time, the gray box it was housed in having been carefully carried over to me by one of the attending librarians and carefully placed on its own table next to me. The materials were incredibly organized but for whom? Morrison's work as editor was confined to a specific group of boxes, the manuscripts of her novels to a different set, the letter she wrote about her sons to their schools to a third, and so on. On the one hand, logically, the organization did make sense: it was neat, tidy, and easy to navigate the thousands of papers that are left for researchers to sift through and attempt to construct an understanding of her life and work. But on

[10] (Rukeyser "WNYC Interview Notes")

the other hand, if promoting an understanding of her life and work is one, if not *the*, reason for the archive's existence, it cannot be entirely dismissed that the archive's structure by extension also imposes a structure, or a lens, through which the researcher is encouraged to understand her life.

It was this experience that made me initially think more deeply about constructions of history and the ways in which our memories of the past are organized. And it was this work, which, perhaps counterintuitively, brought me to literature as the field in which this question was being evocatively explored. As I delved deeper into Morrison's writing itself I saw her exploring this question with precision and detail, whether in her nonfiction essays on the state of literature in American life, in her novel *The Bluest Eye,* or *The Black Book,* a scrap-bookesque image-heavy work that that provides a rich social and cultural history of Black America. Morrison was my starting point in this project, and she also must be the conclusion because it is her writing that most poignantly makes explicit questions I have explored in Rukeyser and McCarthy. I juxtapose Toni Morrison with Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy here as two generations of female authors through which to trace the appearance, and incorporation, of factual evidence into American fiction and literature at large as a way to think about what constitutes history and why.

While Morrison's writing does not focus on her own personal history to the extent that Rukeyser and McCarthy do, all three writers sought new forms to allow them to return to the past, or a present in the process of becoming the past, to document and make visible lives previously unrepresented. And all three pushed at the boundaries of the ending to think anew

about conclusions from the perspective of writers who stand apart from conventions of closure and ultimately reimagine them in their works.

The title of this conclusion is taken from notes Muriel Rukeyser made to herself in preparation for a radio interview on WNYC; jotted down in pencil it serves as a reminder of just how central her childhood, her beginnings, would remain to her, no matter how much traveling she did throughout her career. Her work mimics the spiral pattern of which she writes about in *The Life of Poetry* as a significant force: Rukeyser believes in the centrality of circling back to the beginning in order to understand the present and future. And indeed, this project too is recursive in nature. While the previous pages are an attempt at understanding the writing and lives of Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy, it is but one attempt, and just as their writings are but one version of these histories so too is this just one version of their literary lives.

In concluding this project, I am mindful of a multitude of questions about these two women's work and ways in which today we remember McCarthy and Rukeyser. Further research is called for. Warranting further consideration are the dual themes of anonymity and documentation in Rukeyser's work and the era in which she began her career. It is the work of documentation that Rukeyser engages in throughout the 1930s that seems, while not the central focus of this project, to be a direct extension of it. Rukeyser's texts, in many ways, parallels the focus of the Works Progress Administration photographers, the New Deal U.S. Government initiative that sent photographers out across America to document the individual lives and towns in the midst of a national crisis. And indeed, the WPA sent photographers to the very places Rukeyser was investigating too: Marion Post would document Gauley Bridge just two years after Rukeyser published *The Book of the Dead.* The intertwining of documentation and anonymity I

think warrant specific consideration given it was a time at which the national government was becoming increasingly powerful. How does a country document its citizens? How does a citizen document their country? How does a country document, or not document, its *female* citizens? How does a *female* citizen document their country? At a time when the country was not reckoning with a history of misogyny by any means, how do these women narrate America's happenings and capture its stories?

This project is ultimately a study of the ways in which two female authors made, and documented, meaning in their life and the lives of others through narrative. Writing at a point in which society and government limited the ways in which the voices of women could enter into official conversations and records, Rukeyser and McCarthy's deliberate choice to present an imagined and expansive past is subversive. Exploring ideas of history through literary means – the novel and long form poem, for instance – renders history itself more open to new constructions and new subjects. The writings of Muriel Rukeyser and Mary McCarthy prove Virginia Woolf's thesis in *A Room of One's Own* true: given time and space to write, the results, *The Book of the Dead* and *The Group* are two works of American literature narrated from a uniquely, and powerfully, feminist standpoint. Might Vassar, however imperfect, have provided at least for a short time, something of that time and space? While both authors argue for the importance of remembering the histories about which they write, it is equally important that we remember the literature that tells those histories.

Bibliography

Alcalay, Ammiel. *A Little History.* UpSet Press, 2012.

Androne, Helane Adams. "Revised Memories and Colliding Identities: Absence and Presence in Morrison's 'Recitatif' and Viramontes's 'Tears on My Pillow.'" *MELUS*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2007, pp. 133–50.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Life of the Mind.* Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1978.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations.* Schocken Books, 1969.

Brooks, Cleanth. "The New Criticism." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 87, no. 4, 1979, pp. 592–607. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27543619. Accessed 20 Apr. 2024.

Burgett, Bruce, and Glenn Hendler, editors. *Keywords for American cultural studies*. Vol. 11. NYU Press, 2014.

Cherniack, Martin. *The Hawk's Nest incident: America's worst industrial disaster*. Yale University Press, 1986.

Culley, Margo, editor. *American Women's Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory.* The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992.

Daisy Chain. https://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/vassar-traditions/daisy-chain/. Accessed 6 Apr. 2024.

Daniels, Kate. "Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics." *Gendered Modernisms,* edited by Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, pp. 247-263.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers.* Indiana University Press, 1985.

Eakin, Paul John. *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention.* Princeton University Press, 1985.

Freire, Carlos, photographer. Mary McCarthy, whose new book, Cannibals and missionaries, ... / Carlos Freire. [197-?] Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/93508094/.

Foundation, Poetry. "Children, the Sandbar, That Summer by Muriel Rukeyser." *Poetry Magazine*, Poetry Magazine, 16 Aug. 2023, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/26651/children-the-sandbar-that-summer. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/.

Foundation, Poetry. "Käthe Kollwitz by Muriel Rukeyser." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 30 Apr. 2024, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/90874/kathe-kollwitz. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/.

Gander, Catherine. "Introduction." *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection*, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp. 1–22. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt3fgt6b.4. Accessed 30 Apr. 2024.

Gilligan, Carol. "Reply by Carol Gilligan." *Signs*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1986, pp. 324–33. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174055. Accessed 31 Mar. 2024.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Human Voice.* Polity, 2023.

"Guide to the Mary McCarthy Papers, circa 1915-2013 (Bulk 1960-1989) | Vassar College Digital Library." *Digitallibrary.vassar.edu*,

digitallibrary.vassar.edu/collections/finding-aids/2753a4b1-21c0-403c-a213-10bb1c3e63ba. Accessed 30 Apr. 2024.

Hartmen, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals.* W.W. Norton & Company, 2019.

Hook, Sidney. *The Hero in History.* Qualitone Press, 1943.

Jacobi, Lotte, photographer. Muriel Rukeyser, bust portrait, facing right / photo by Lotte Jacobi. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/95517256/.

Kiernan, Frances. *Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy*. W.W. Norton, 2002.

Keller, Frances Richardson. *Fictions of U.S. History: A Theory and Four Illustrations*. Indiana University Press, 2002. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bard/detail.action?docID=127790.

Kennedy-Epstein, Rowena. *Unfinished Spirit: Muriel Rukeyser's Twentieth Century*. Cornell University Press, 2022.

Langdon, Emily A. "Women's Colleges Then and Now: Access Then, Equity Now." *Peabody Journal of Education*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2001, pp. 5–30. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1493003. Accessed 1 May 2024.

Lobo, Julius. "From 'The Book of the Dead' to 'Gauley Bridge': Muriel Rukeyser's Documentary Poetics and Film at the Crossroads of the Popular Front." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2012, pp. 77–102. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.35.3.77.

Lowney, John. *History, Memory, and the Literary Left.* University of Iowa Press, 2006.

Mailer, Norman. “The Mary McCarthy Case.” *The New York Review of Books*, 17 Oct. 1963, www.nybooks.com/articles/1963/10/17/the-mary-mccarthy-case/. Accessed 1 May 2024.

“Making the Case for Integration - Vassar, the Alumnae/I Quarterly.” https://www.vassar.edu/vq/issues/2011/01/web-features/case-for-integration. Accessed 1 May 2024.

McCarthy, Mary. “Notes on the Writing of *The Group*” Box 26, Folder 1, undated. Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.

McCarthy, Mary. “Notes on the Novel.” Box 26, Folder 1, undated. Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.

McCarthy, Mary. “Vassar College Alumni Bulletin.” Box 21, Folder 7, 1953. Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.

McCarthy, Mary. “Letter to Hertel.” Box 21, Folder 9, 1964. Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.

McCarthy, Mary. “Letter on Masters Thesis.” Box 23, Folder 5, 1964. Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.

McCarthy, Mary. *The Group.* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963.

McCarthy, Mary. *How I Grew.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.

McCarthy, Mary. *Intellectual Memoirs: New York 1936-1938*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.

McCarthy, Mary. *Novels & Stories 1942-1963.* Edited by Thomas Mallon. Library of America, 2017.

Morrison, Toni. *Recititatif.* Knopf Publishing, 2022.

Morrison, Toni. *The Source of Self Regard.* Vintage International, 2020.

Nekola, Charlotte, and Paula Rabinowitz, eds. *Writing red: An anthology of American women writers, 1930-1940*. 1987. Haymarket Books, 2022.

Nelson, Deborah. *Though Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil.* The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Neuman, Shirley, editor. *Autobiography and Questions of Gender.* Frank Cass & Co., 1991.

Packard, William, editor. *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly.* Doubleday & Company, 1974.

Phiri, Aretha, and Michelle M. Wright. "Interview: 'The Elephant in the Room': Talking (Physics of) Blackness with Michelle M. Wright." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, Mar. 2023, pp. 333–40. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2022.2104896.

Rexroth, Kenneth. "Poetic Responses." *The New York Times*, 19 Oct. 1958, p. 187.

Richards, I. A. *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement.* Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929.

Rosenberg, Liz. "A Good Grip on Creation." *The New York Times*, 26 Oct. 1997, p. 155.

Rukeyser, Muriel. "Letter to Fanny Borden." Box 2, Folder 1, 1942. Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.

Rukeyser, Muriel. "Letter to the Front." 1944.

Rukeyser, Muriel. "Notes for an Interview at W.N.Y.C." Holograph, unsigned, dated Sept. 24, 1970. Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

Rukeyser, Muriel. *Willard Gibbs*. Ox Bow Press, 1988.

Rukeyser, Muriel. *The Life of Poetry*. Paris Press, 1996.

Rukeyser, Muriel. *The Book of the Dead*. West Virginia University Press, 2018.

Rukeyser, Muriel. *The Muriel Rukeyser Era*. Edited by Eric Keenaghan and Rowena Kennedy-Epstein. Cornell University Press, 2023.

Schoenfeld, Alan H. "Learning to Think Mathematically: Problem Solving, Metacognition, and Sense Making in Mathematics (Reprint)." *The Journal of Education*, vol. 196, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1–38. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26612611. Accessed 19 Apr. 2024.

"SENATOR HOLT BACKS SILICOSIS INQUIRY." *The New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1936, p. 2.

Sifton, Elizabeth. "The Art of Fiction No. 27." *Www.theparisreview.org*, 1962, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4618/the-art-of-fiction-no-27-mary-mccarthy. Accessed 30 Apr. 2024.

"SILICOSIS DEATHS ASSAILED IN HOUSE." *The New York Times*, 8 Feb. 1936, p. 5.

Snitow, Ann. *The Feminism of Uncertainty.* Duke University Press, 2015.

Spangler, Patricia. *The Hawks Nest Tunnel: An Abridged History.* Wythe-North Publishing, 2008.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996.

Thurston, Michael. *Making Something Happen: American Poetry Political Between The World Wars.* The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History.* Beacon Press, 1995.

Uffelman, Minoa D., and Charles Reagan Wilson. "Scottsboro Boys." *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 13: Gender*, edited by Nancy Bercraw and Ted Ownby, University of North Carolina Press, 2009, pp. 346–47. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469616728_bercaw.109. Accessed 17 Mar. 2024.

Vassar's Hall of Presidents - Vassar, the Alumnae/i Quarterly. https://www.vassar.edu/vq/issues/2006/02/features/vassars-hall-of-presidents.html. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.

Vassar College Registrar. "Muriel Rukeyser Transcript." 1932.

Vassar College Registrar. "Mary McCarthy Transcript." 1933.

Wolcott, Marion Post, photographer. Negro woman washing clothes outside of shacks along the river. On highway between Charleston and Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. Sept. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2017753314/.

Wechsler, Shoshana. "A Ma(t)Ter of Fact and Vision: The Objectivity Question and Muriel Rukeyser's 'The Book of the Dead.'" *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 45, no. 2, 1999, pp. 121–37. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/441826.

White, Richard. "Walter Benjamin: 'The Storyteller' and the Possibility of Wisdom." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–14. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.51.1.0001.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own.* Harcourt, Inc., 1957.

Woolf, Virginia. *Three Guineas.* Mariner Books Classics, 1963.

Wright, Michelle M. *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle passage Epistemology.* University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Wright, Michelle M. "1619: The Danger of a Single Origin Story: American Literary History." *American Literary History*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2020 Winter 2020, pp. e1–12.