Keenaghan, Eric, and Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, eds. 2023. *The Muriel Rukeyser Era: Selected Prose*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. Pp. 338. ISBN 9781501771750, Paperback $29.95.

Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980), best known for the sweeping phases of her poetry, from the proletarian literature of the 1930s through the gender and body poetics of the 1970s Feminist wave, was also an amazingly prolific producer of prose. A transgressor of traditional disciplinary boundaries and of social categories of gender, class, and race, Rukeyser, a bisexual single mother, poet, essayist, teacher, critic, and advocate, produced poems, short stories, plays, journalism, articles, essays, lectures, books, radio programs, and a musical about Houdini. She collaborated with her friend, the photographer Berenice Abbott, who had studied with Man Ray and shared a mutual interest in the confluences of science, art, and technological innovation. She wrote biographies of individuals like astronomer and navigational innovator Thomas Hariot and theoretical physicist Josiah Willard Gibbs, whom she felt were deeply influential yet largely unrecognized beyond their fields of specialization. She loved people who, like Houdini, maneuvered outside the box, and she herself excelled in doing so. Her study of Gibbs improbably included a long treatise on the Amistad case and the defense of the enslaved persons who mutinied to obtain their freedom. This was not surprising for a writer who had long demonstrated her keen commitment to racial and social justice, taught at a labor school and a women's college, and regularly defied established barriers of class and Jim Crow. Rukeyser as a young woman fresh from Vassar College covered the Scottsboro Nine case as a journalist. She wrote later of Sacco and Vanzetti and of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. As a leader of PEN America, she championed the rights of translators and protested the political imprisonment of poets. The lyrics of one of the songs for *Houdini* (1973) begins "I make my magic / of forgotten things",[1] and this is just what Rukeyser did throughout her life as a writer.

In their new edited collection of Rukeyser's prose, *The Muriel Rukeyser Era,* Eric Keenaghan and Rowena Kennedy-Epstein present Rukeyser as fundamentally a documentarian and social theorist. Their book frames Rukeyser as a public intellectual and reads like fast-forwarded film sequences of American culture of much of the twentieth century, inclusive of the American Left. They draw for the selected texts from Rukeyser's prose work in several genres. They mix and match unpublished archival documents

1. See Levi 1995, 238.

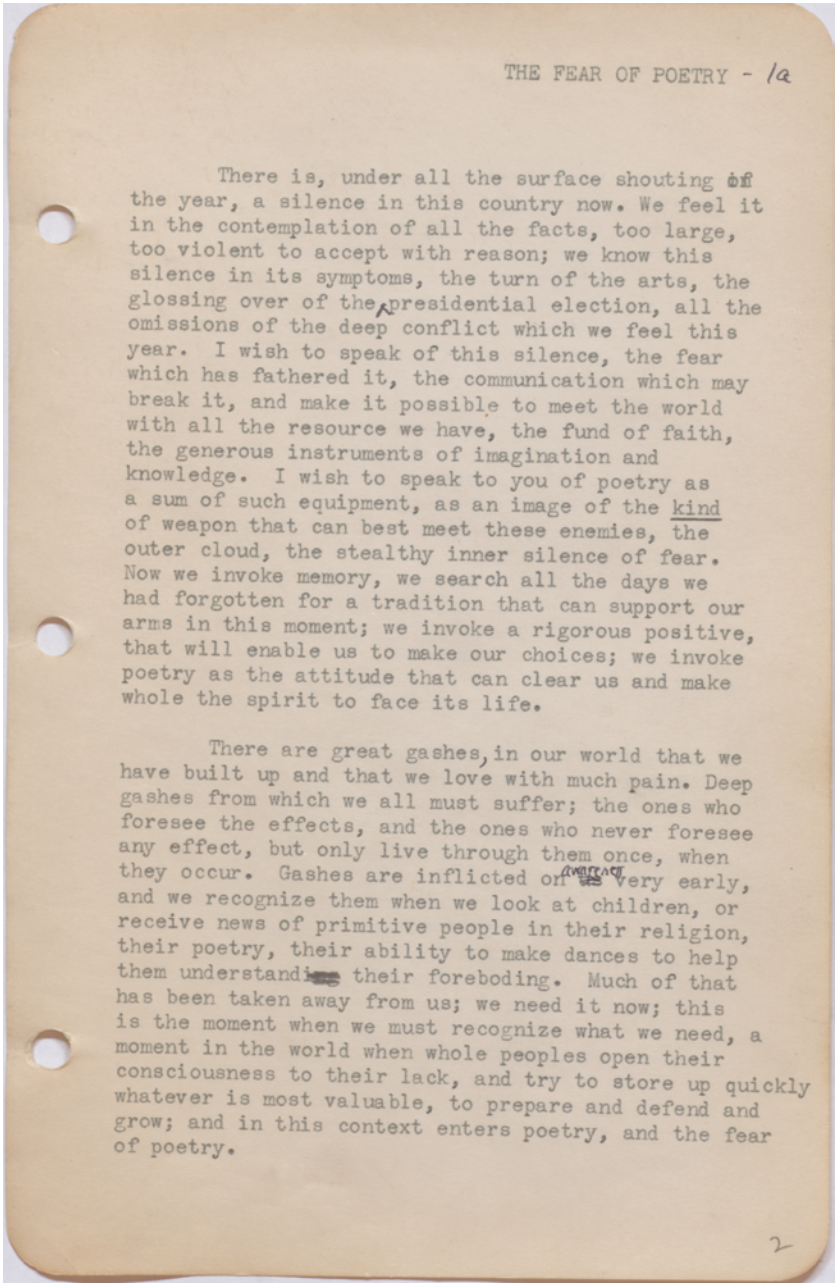
from Rukeyser manuscript collections at the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library with published short works from a variety of periodicals, including the *Vassar Miscellany News, The New Masses*, and *The New York Times*, and from literary journals such as the *Kenyon Review*. They use as copytext published matter or drafts they judge as the latest extant version or the fair copy with the most edits, and they offer brief annotations to explain sources, internal references, and textual notes.

In Part I of *The Muriel Rukeyser Era,* the editors highlight the series of lectures on poetry (The Usable Truth) Rukeyser delivered at Vassar College in 1940 and later reworked into *The Life of Poetry* (1949). Only the first of these, the consummate "The Fear of Poetry" (see Fig. 1, below), delivered October 29, 1940, was published. For that lecture Keenaghan and Kennedy-Epstein relied on the printed version from Dorothy Norman's magazine of culture and politics, *Twice a Year*, 1941, as their copytext. The full series of five lectures exist in typescript form in the Muriel Rukeyser Papers at the Library of Congress Manuscript Division and all are included in the new collection.

Rukeyser begins "The Fear of Poetry" (1940) with a line about volatile rhetoric and self-censorship: "There is, under all the surface shouting of the year, a silence in the country now."[2] Her audience was listening to her observations in a presidential election year as the world poised on the brink of international war and implementation of systems of ghettoization and mass extermination, and was seeing reprisals against intellectuals, the exodus of refugees, acts of terrorism, book purging, and the rise of fascism. Rukeyser — a woman, a Jew — offers them the idea that poetry is a source of courage and confrontation, a counterforce to repressive governments and false denials of freedom. Artwork and texts, she argues, provide a meeting place for greater humanity, and are worthy weapons against "the stealthy inner silence of fear."[3]

Emblematic of this lecture and of Rukeyser's fuller career, Keenaghan and Kennedy-Epstein chose as the image for their book's cover design a Rukeyser artwork entitled "The Four Fears", which comes from the Library of Congress Rukeyser archival collection (see Fig. 2, below). This illustrative paratext features a miniscule-sized woman facing a towering set

2. Reprinted in Keenaghan and Kennedy-Epstein 2023, 39. Typescript text in the Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., I:43, folder 4 (hereafter cited as MRP, LOC). The print version of the lecture was published in *Twice a Year,* Fall/Winter 1941, 15–33.
3. Ibid., 39.



THE FEAR OF POETRY - 1a

There is, under all the surface shouting of the year, a silence in this country now. We feel it in the contemplation of all the facts, too large, too violent to accept with reason; we know this silence in its symptoms, the turn of the arts, the glossing over of the presidential election, all the omissions of the deep conflict which we feel this year. I wish to speak of this silence, the fear which has fathered it, the communication which may break it, and make it possible to meet the world with all the resource we have, the fund of faith, the generous instruments of imagination and knowledge. I wish to speak to you of poetry as a sum of such equipment, as an image of the kind of weapon that can best meet these enemies, the outer cloud, the stealthy inner silence of fear. Now we invoke memory, we search all the days we had forgotten for a tradition that can support our arms in this moment; we invoke a rigorous positive, that will enable us to make our choices; we invoke poetry as the attitude that can clear us and make whole the spirit to face its life.

There are great gashes, in our world that we have built up and that we love with much pain. Deep gashes from which we all must suffer; the ones who foresee the effects, and the ones who never foresee any effect, but only live through them once, when they occur. Gashes are inflicted on us very early, and we recognize them when we look at children, or receive news of primitive people in their religion, their poetry, their ability to make dances to help them understand their foreboding. Much of that has been taken away from us; we need it now; this is the moment when we must recognize what we need, a moment in the world when whole peoples open their consciousness to their lack, and try to store up quickly whatever is most valuable, to prepare and defend and grow; and in this context enters poetry, and the fear of poetry.

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Figure 1. Muriel Rukeyser, "The Fear of Poetry," lecture, Vassar College, October 29, 1940. Muriel Rukeyser Papers, LOC I:43, Folder 4. Reproduced with permission of William L. Rukeyser.

Figure 2. Muriel Rukeyser, *The Four Fears,* "All you have to do is challenge them", 1955. Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC, Box II:20, drawings folder. Reproduced with the permission of William L. Rukeyser.

of menacing figures on pedestals. An almost invisible handwritten caption marginalized at the edge reads: "all you have to do is challenge them."[4] Keenaghan and Kennedy-Epstein re-use this caption text as the subtitle for their editorial introduction to the book (1).

What is the Muriel Rukeyser era? It is a matter of timeline, perspective, substance, and multimodality. The editors let Rukeyser provide her own author's introduction by reprinting an autobiographical statement from a 1944 symposium in the front matter along with their own editorial introduction. The autobiographical piece traces Rukeyser's origins in New York City ("I was born in New York, and I always loved the city" [30]), her complicated intellectual relation to Judaism, and the elements she perceived as basic to her personal identity. After featuring the 1940 Vassar lectures in Part I, the book offers in Part II texts from Rukeyser's protest and social justice journalism of the 1930s, including the pivotal experience she had as eyewitness to the start of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, which continued to reverberate throughout her life, and later pieces on politics and culture from the Cold War and 1970s.

4. Muriel Rukeyser, *The Four Fears*, illustration, MRP, LOC, II:20, drawings folder. Cover design of *Rukeyser Era* by Henry Sene Yee.

Part III focuses on "So Easy to See" (1946), Rukeyser's text-and-photographs collaboration with Abbott, with its commentary on materiality, reality, and truth, and features two of the four episodes from Rukeyser's short-lived radio series, *Sunday at Nine* (1949) broadcast on KDFC in San Francisco. The editors present the extant documentation for the first episode, on Emily Dickinson (see Fig. 3, below), in which Rukeyser

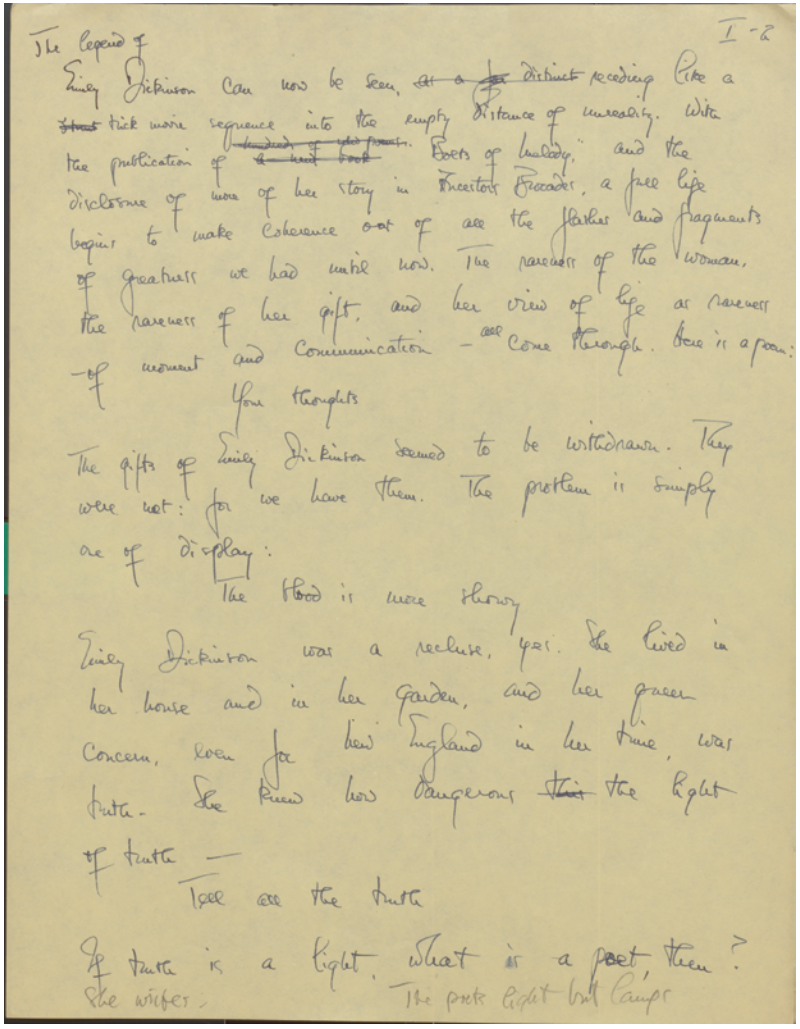
The legend of
I-8
Emily Dickinson can now be seen, ~~at a~~ distinct receding like a ~~thick~~ thick movie sequence into the empty distance of unreality. With the publication of ~~hundreds of the poems~~ ~~a new book~~ Poets of Ludlow, and the disclosure of more of her story in Ancestors Brocade, a free life begins to make coherence out of all the flashes and fragments of greatness we had until now. The rareness of the woman, the rareness of her gift, and her view of life as rareness of moment and Communication — all come through. Here is a poem:
Your thoughts
The gifts of Emily Dickinson seemed to be withdrawn. They were not: for we have them. The problem is simply one of display:
The Hood is more shown
Emily Dickinson was a recluse, yes. She lived in her house and in her garden, and her grave Concern, even for her England in her time, was truth. She knew how dangerous ~~this~~ the light of truth —
I see the truth
If truth is a light, what is a poet, then?
She whispers. The poet light but keeps

Figure 3. Muriel Rukeyser, "Emily Dickinson", *Sunday at Nine* radio broadcast, 1949. Muriel Rukeyser Papers, LOC II:14, folder 9. Reproduced with permission of William L. Rukeyser.

observes, "The rareness of the woman, the rareness of her gift, and her view of life as rareness" (186–87), and the last episode, on the blues, in which Rukeyser spoke of oral tradition, musicology, and improvised lyrics. In that fourth episode, she reminded her listening audience that not all poetry is written down, and what is not written down changes and reaches a wider audience. She featured examples of the artistry of Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, and others. In these radio broadcasts — which preceded modern podcasts of a similar style by decades — Rukeyser mixed literary criticism with commentary, read sections of poems aloud, and interspersed musical selections, all in an effort to use modern media for democratic education and outreach, and to honor oral/audio as well as written forms.

The final section of the edited collection, Part IV, examines Rukeyser's relation to modernism and gender, and her reviews of other writer's work, including analyses of Horace Gregory, Robinson Jeffers, Robert Frost, Marya Zaturenska, Rainier Maria Rilke, Charlotte Marletto, Frederico Garcia Lorca, Kenneth Rexroth, Marianne Moore, Henry David Thoreau, Anne Sexton, and Franz Kafka.

Keenaghan and Kennedy-Epstein explain in their editorial preface that recovering Rukeyser's "lost and forgotten work" is their "volume's chief aim" (xvii). What Rukeyser did for others — speaking on their behalf, calling their work and their lives to the surface of consciousness — the editors seek to do for her. In *The Rukeyser Era,* they revive Rukeyser, and with her, offer a reminder of her times.

Barbara Bair
Library of Congress

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