PARSE

# The Book of the Dead

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**Abstract**
My film revisits Muriel Rukeyser's 1938 poem *The Book of the Dead*, a documentary work exposing the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster, in which hundreds of mostly Black workers died of silicosis. Rukeyser used documentary fragments—testimonies, medical reports, and interviews—to build a poetic montage. I respond to her unfinished film script and experimental method by adapting her work during the Covid-19 pandemic, using a green screen and game-engine software to create a virtual environment. My adaptation replaces her white subjects with Black actors, reframing the racial violence at the core of the tragedy. Drawing on Saidiya Hartman's speculative fabulation and Kathryn Yusoff's critique of geology as racial violence, the film treats infrastructure as both material and metaphor. The work listens to the dead and speaks again, extending Rukeyser's forensic poetry into a racially and environmentally precarious present.

My film, *The Book of the Dead*, revisits Muriel Rukeyser's 1938 documentary poem of the same title an uncompromising work that exposes one of the worst industrial disasters in US history. Nearly one thousand workers most of them poor Black migrant workers died of silicosis after being hired to dig a tunnel through pure silica without proper breathing protection in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. The tunnel, commissioned by Union Carbide, was built to divert the New River and power a steel plant.

Rukeyser traveled to West Virginia in 1936. She gathered newspaper articles, congressional testimonies, medical reports, letters from workers, and interviewed survivors and families of the deceased. From these fragments, she assembled her poems an appropriative and forensic act, recomposing stories and facts that the press largely ignored. Her poems quote directly from reality and alchemize it through the tools of poetry line, rhythm, fragmentation, montage. It is investigative and imagistic. In an interview with Marxist literary critic Samuel Sillen, she said about *The Book of the Dead* that she wanted to "write a series of poems linked together like the sequences in a movie are linked together."[1] Her method of constructing poems from documentary materials is not unlike photography: it indexes the real and reframes it through the perspective of the author.

In many ways, Rukeyser's poem offers a model of experimental documentary: a turning of facts into poetry, of reportage into action. Her use of montage her weaving of testimonials with geographic descriptions and mythic allusion to the Egyptian Book of the Dead became a generative model for me. I encountered a reference to an unfinished screenplay in Sarah Ehlers's excellent book *Left of Poetry: Depression America and the Formation of Modern Poetry* (2019). Rukeyser tried to turn her poem into a feature documentary titled *Gauley Bridge*. The film was never produced, but she published a treatment in a 1940 issue of *Film*.[2] This text was my entry point a way of responding to her unfinished cinematic gesture.

The adaptation took form during the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time of mounting global and domestic crisis. I

worked while confined in Los Angeles filming in a green-screen studio, building the environment virtually with Unreal Engine. I replaced Rukeyser's white subjects with Black actors. This choice was both speculative and corrective. Most of the actual tunnel workers were Black, and the violence they suffered was racialized.[3] They were paid less, charged more for housing and utilities, and forced to work in unsafe conditions. Yet in Rukeyser's poem, only one Black voice George Robinson's is foregrounded. My film reimagines the majority of the workers as Black, bringing race to the foreground, not to obscure labor, but to show how labor, race, and ecology are entangled.

My art practice engages infrastructure not only as a subject, but as a method, and uses infrastructure as medium. Working with the structures of development, extraction, and media and the violence they enact *The Book of the Dead* offered me a chance to think about infrastructure as both literal and symbolic: a tunnel bored through a mountain, but also through bodies, through time, through history.

Saidiya Hartman's concept of speculative fabulation was a key for me. In her essay "The Dead Book Revisited," Hartman turns to the absences and holes in the archive, the missing voices and distorted records, and begins to imagine plausible inner lives, feelings, and resistances of Black people, particularly girls and women during the middle passage. Her approach mixing forensic details with narrative invention encouraged me to treat Rukeyser's source material as both document and prompt for a surreal *para-fiction*. If Rukeyser turned voices of workers into poems, I imagined them read again, decades later, by actors in a world still warped by the incessant constructs of racism and disposability.

One rehearsal brought this sharply into focus. Actor Gem Nelson, rehearsing the role of Emma Jones, a white Gauley Bridge mother recalling her son's battle with silicosis in the poem "Absalom" misread her line, "Mother, I cannot get my breath" as "I can't breathe" the final words of George Floyd and rallying chant of Back Lives Matter demonstrators. The echo between the son of Shirley Jones's words in 1930s West Virginia and George Floyd's last words in 2020 revealed for us the connective tissue of the project. The same suffocation. The same silence. The same grief.

In her book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018), Kathryn Yusoff argues that geology mining, extraction, land seizure have always been racialized.[4] Black and brown bodies have been treated as geological material, as expendable resources. Her insight hewed my thinking about the tunnel: seeing it as not just an industrial site, but as a graveyard. The company paid an undertaker to bury workers swiftly so no autopsies could be performed and confirm the actual causes of death.

This film continues Rukeyser's unfinished work. It borrows her form but shifts its scope. It listens to the dead and speaks again.

**Footnotes**

1. Sillen, Samuel. Transcript interview with Muriel Rukeyser. Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library. ↑

2. Ehlers, Sarah. Left of Poetry: Depression America and the Formation of Modern Poetics. Chapel Hill:

University of North Carolina Press. 2019. ↑

3. Dayton, Tim. Muriel Rukeyser's The Book of the Dead. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. 2015. ↑

4. Yusoff, Kathryn. A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2018. ↑

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1. Sillen, Samuel. Transcript interview with Muriel Rukeyser. Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
2. Ehlers, Sarah. Left of Poetry: Depression America and the Formation of Modern Poetics. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2019.
3. Dayton, Tim. Muriel Rukeyser's The Book of the Dead. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. 2015.
4. Yusoff, Kathryn. A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2018.