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Author(s): Catherine Gander

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“Facing the Fact: Word and Image in Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘Worlds Alongside’”¹

Catherine Gander

In 1939, the small format picture magazine *Coronet* featured two photo-textual experiments. These were arranged as a “portfolio of photographs” supported by a poetic prose “narrative” by Muriel Rukeyser. They were published in the September and October issues, and were titled, respectively, “Adventures of Children” and “Worlds Alongside.” The photo-narratives were experimental not least in the fact that they did not adhere to established contemporary formulae regarding the presentation of word-image pairings in magazine reports, such as those featured in *Life* or *Time* since the height of the Great Depression, as well as those featured previously in the more arts-orientated *Coronet*. Hailed by the editors of *Coronet* as “infinitely superior to the usual picture-gallery treatment” of photographs and descriptive captions in the publication (120), Rukeyser’s photo-narratives nevertheless puzzled several readers, offended some, and remain an intriguing and, I argue, vital part of her oeuvre. For the purposes of this essay, which will attempt to unravel the complexity of Rukeyser’s use of word and image, tracing the aesthetic, ideological, and poetic implications of her photo-narrative work, I will dedicate my analysis to the second of the pieces, “Worlds Alongside.” Although both photo-narratives utilize the format of the picture magazine to explore dual aspects of modern life—the separate yet parallel social spheres of wealth and poverty, of civilized sophistication and primitive simplicity, for example—“Worlds

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Alongside,” as its title would indicate, provides a richer text through which to interrogate these themes, as well as Rukeyser’s management of them.

Sixteen pages in length, the photo-narratives each contain six image pairings, in which two photographs are arranged to face each other on the verso and recto of the double-page spread: one combination of four images, organized in double pairings on the same format, and two single images, one beginning and one ending the photo-narrative, the text of which runs beneath each photograph in neat, centered font. The theme of duality in “Worlds Alongside,” then, begins in its formal presentation. “Worlds living now!” opens the narrative (Figure 1), an exclamatory sentence that seems at odds with the silent tranquility of the image of verdant landscape above it.

The prosperous fecundity of this portion of American existence² is highlighted by Rukeyser’s choice of descriptors—“rich” and “fertility” (83)—which further enhance the effect of the image directly overleaf: a larger documentary photograph by Dorothea Lange of dustbowl desolation, in which the twin rudimentary and disused post-boxes indicate that this part of “the same country’s” (84) landscape cannot sustain life of any kind (Figure 2).

The ornate city “tower” (85) to the right of the dustbowl image, doubled through the windowpane of the tower in which the photographer obviously stands, serves to cement the established theme of duality and difference visible in the “same” world. Exploiting what Edwin Rosskam in the same year had termed the “new unit” of communication, “the double-paged spread in which word and image complemented each other” (7), Rukeyser stages encounters between representative images of ostensibly social, cultural, or ethnic opposites. The potential for communication between these worlds resides in the ocular dialectic that Rukeyser highlights as symptomatic of the Depression era’s dependency on visuality: a self-other relation bound up in the introspection and objectification generated by the documentary gaze.

For example, appearing two thirds of the way through “Worlds Alongside,” Figure 3 demonstrates the layers of meaning constructed in Rukeyser’s use of image, text, and format; more precisely, Depression-era documentary photographs (Farm Security Administration [FSA] images by Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein respectively), a textual narrative



Worlds Alongside

A PORTFOLIO OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Narrative by Muriel Rukeyser

Worlds living now! A country made rich by
sun and effort, with its valley fertility, fields
cultivated inch by inch.

The sun takes it, making a local profile of
trees and steeple . . .

OCTOBER, 1939

83

Figure 1: "Worlds Alongside," *Coronet* Oct. 1939, page 83, FSA photograph, photographer unknown. Reprinted courtesy of the Library of Congress.

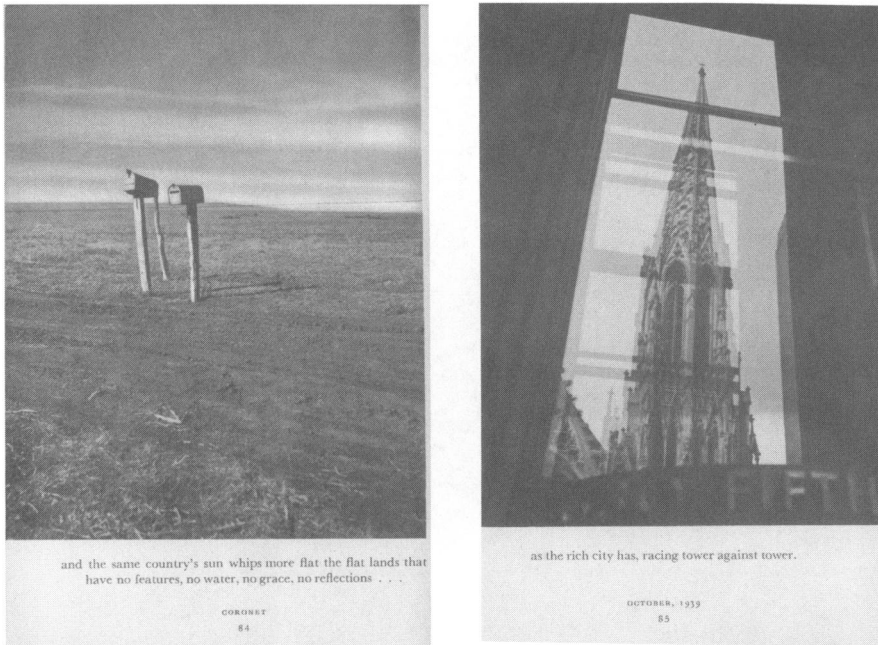
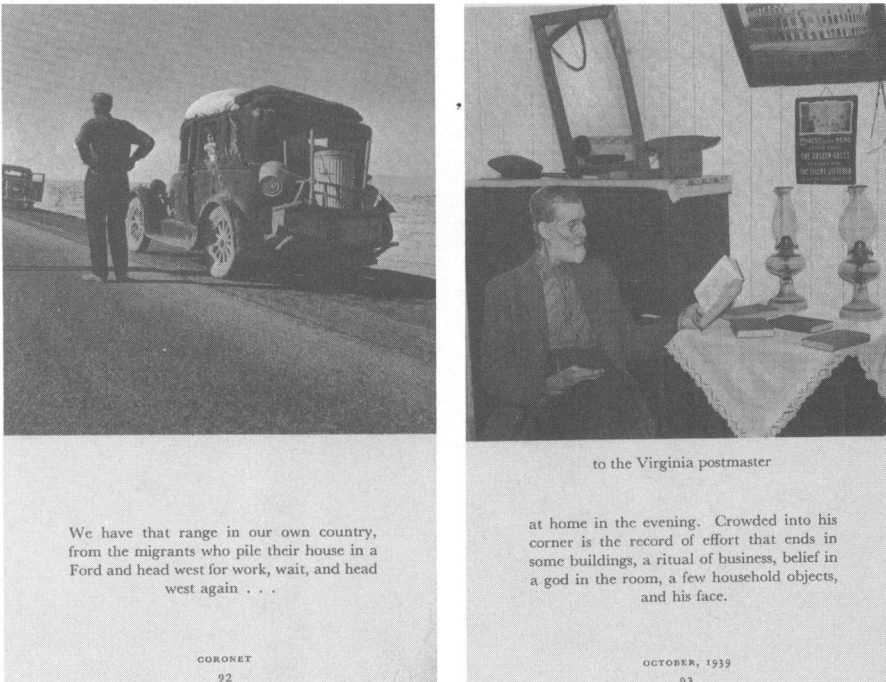


Figure 2: “Worlds Alongside,” *Coronet* Oct. 1939, pages 84-85. FSA photograph by Dorothea Lange (left) reprinted courtesy of the Library of Congress.

that both reflects and complicates the images to which it responds, and the double-page configuration that contrives the words and images to face each other.

As I will explore later in this essay, Rukeyser is both participating in and challenging the thirties’ documentary rhetoric of social signification in this pairing. The narrative use of the first-person plural (“We have that range in our own country . . .” [92]) indicates an atmosphere of inclusivity that is quickly dissipated by the objective categorization of the nameless subjects of the photographs, who appear to be treated as little more than indexes of social types: the poverty-stricken “migrant” or the affluent “postmaster” (whose affluence also stands in opposition to the poverty implied in Lange’s image of isolated post-boxes) (92–93). Keep looking (the least that Rukeyser intends us to do, as this essay will hopefully demon-



[Figure 3: “Worlds Alongside,” *Coronet* Oct. 1939, pages 92–93. FSA photographs by Dorothea Lange (left) and Arthur Rothstein (right) reprinted courtesy of the Library of Congress.]

strate), and bridging the gap between these worlds of instability and security via such means as the magazine-picture essay appears increasingly doubtful. The fact that the people in the photographs are in very different states of visual awareness complicates the face-to-face nature of the layout. While the migrant worker, one of many who “pile their house in a Ford” (92), stands facing away from us, demonstrating no concern about whether the camera captures his image, the Virginian postmaster sits rigidly posed, aware of, but avoiding looking at, the camera lens as he supposedly relaxes “at home in the evening” (93). Although their images are contrived to face each other on the pages, Rukeyser has chosen to position the two men with their backs to one another, foregrounding the ultimately unknowable nature of their separate subjectivities. Furthermore, by not returning the gaze of the spectator/reader, the subjects of the pho-

tographs appear even more objectified, consumed, and spoken for than the narrative beneath their images might imply. Considered in this way, then, Rukeyser's use of "we" can be read as both inclusive and reproachful of the reader.

"Reader" is an apt word here. Scattered in a somewhat unnatural pattern across his table are the postmaster's books, one of which he holds open in his hand and is apparently reading. Apart from reflecting the action of the reader of *Coronet*, whose appreciation of the photo-narrative is not simply visual but haptic (and who therefore holds the postmaster in her/his own hands), this visual *punctum*, as Roland Barthes might have it, opens consideration of the way in which we read pictures.³ Instead of providing an indexical series of images of the dispossessed and privileged, accompanied by an explanatory text, Rukeyser demonstrates that pictures make us think—make us question our own ways of reading, or looking at them and the people whom they apparently represent. I will return to this subject, and to each of the image pairings discussed above and immediately below, in more detail later in the essay. For now, however, I would like to foreground the unusual and complex visual dialectic of "Worlds Alongside," further complicated by the fact that the migrant-postmaster spread is situated between the central pairing of the photo-narrative, that of the twinned faces of a young African tribal woman and the American dancer Margaret Graham (Figure 4), and the pairing of a large, blind face and a whirlpool (Figure 5).

These juxtapositions serve to illustrate at the outset of this essay not only the multiplicity of the "worlds" that Rukeyser is setting alongside each other (and by extension, the connections that she is attempting to make between them), but the ideological risks involved in making what at first glance appear to be rather strange or superficial connections. There are obvious perils in categorizing the African subject in Figure 4 as "primitive" and "receptive" (90); a passive spectacle in formal and social opposition to the "finished face" (90) of Graham, a figure referred to by name on a later page of the photo-narrative whose active choice of self-presentation as performative spectacle serves to highlight the lack of aesthetic autonomy in the photograph of the young African. "Worlds Alongside" in this way consistently raises and challenges issues of agency and appropriation, categorization, and ambiguity. The difference between aesthetic autonomy and subjugation is unresolved in the photo-narrative, and the only

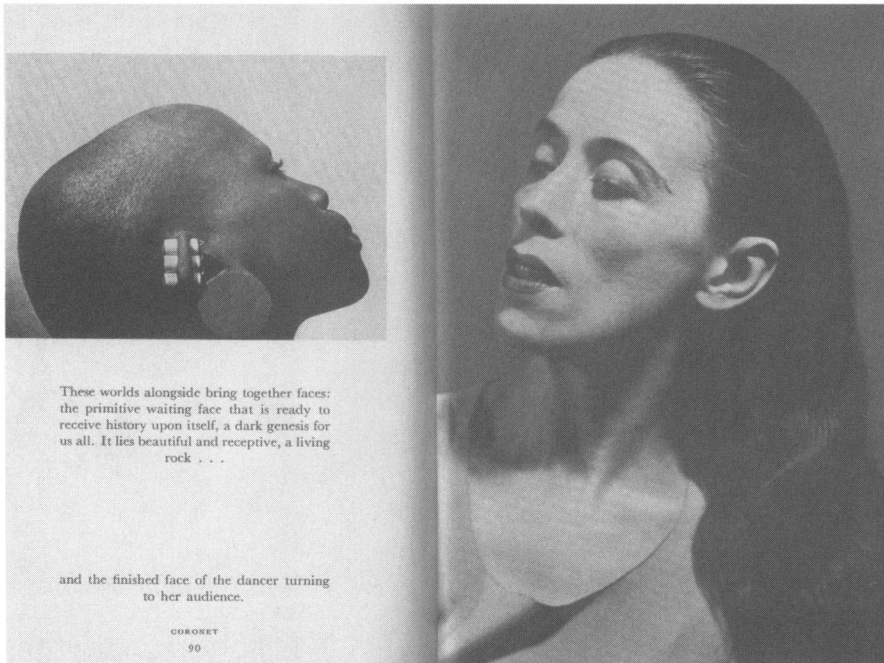


Figure 4: “Worlds Alongside,” *Coronet* Oct. 1939, pages 90–91. Photograph copyright unknown.

face to stare straight out of the magazine is apparently blind—a fact that might leave the reader uneasy if it were not for Rukeyser’s persistent emphasis on the variety of perspectives necessary to understand difference and thus build connections in the world based on its heterogeneity.

Rukeyser’s “Worlds Alongside” continually confronts and unpicks ethical, aesthetic, and ideological concerns such as these, and while the brief examples above indicate the complexity of the image-text dialectic in the photo-narrative, they also point to the irreducibility of its particulars. Produced at a time when several American picture magazines were engaging in the combination of visual and verbal reportage in order to communicate both the effects of the Depression and the New Deal reform projects initiated to appease them, Rukeyser’s photo-narratives for *Coronet* simultaneously participated in and radically altered the conservative, documentary mode of the magazine photo-essay. In the sections that follow, I will con-

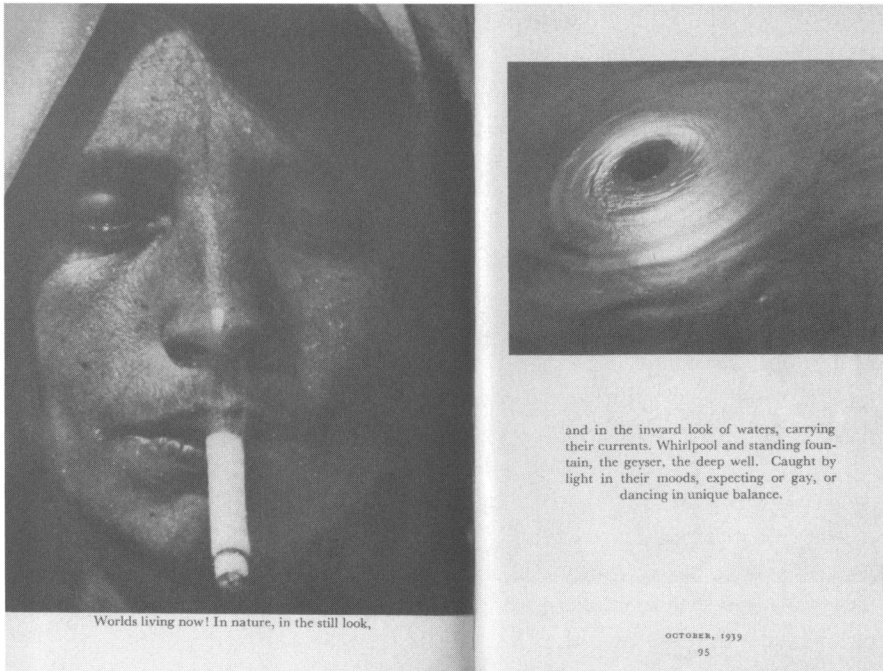


Figure 5: “Worlds Alongside,” *Coronet* Oct. 1939, pages 94–95. Left: © The Estate of Erwin Blumenfeld.

textualize Rukeyser’s photo-narratives as well as her engagement in photo-textual and documentary forms, relating them to her lifelong poetics of connection. I will then provide closer readings of “Worlds Alongside,” exploring the ethical, aesthetic, and ideological implications of the photo-narrative for its contemporary readership, its place in Rukeyser’s oeuvre, and its contribution to visual-verbal practices.

Rukeyser’s Poetics and Documentary Aesthetics

In the publicity quotation for the back cover of *The Speed of Darkness* (1968), Kenneth Rexroth celebrated Rukeyser as “by far the best poet of her exact generation.” As this essay will indicate, Rukeyser’s work was shaped by the wide-ranging aesthetic and ideological concerns that developed contemporaneously with this “exact generation”—a generation that

came of age when the documentary genre represented the principle means of communicating cultural values and reporting social and personal realities. Coined in 1926 by the filmmaker John Grierson to mean “the creative treatment of actuality” (Hardy 11), the intertextual innovation of the documentary genre as it reflected and defined 1930s America coincided with Rukeyser’s own imaginative, relational, and responsible way of looking at the world.

Throughout her life, Rukeyser wrote with the conviction that there are “two kinds of poems: the poems of unverifiable facts, based in dreams, in sex, in everything that can be given to other people only through the skill and strength by which it is given; and the other kind being the document, the poem that rests on material evidence” (*Education of a Poet* 226). This inherent “doubleness” in her work, as Rukeyser termed it, allowed her writing to become the “meeting-place” of ostensibly opposed disciplines, practices, and cultures. Rukeyser’s lasting passion for and unremitting promotion of a poetics of connection is something that every Rukeyser scholar will instantly recognize as the guiding force behind her life and work. For Rukeyser, who admitted to being “deeply concerned with the evidence of the world,” the “facts” of human existence could be “reported” via the confluence of subjective and objective, “artistic” and “scientific” ways of experiencing reality.⁴ Developing her career in a literary environment dominated by documentary discourse, Rukeyser found a method by which to articulate her conviction: the duality of the document and the unverifiable fact found natural expression in the combinative form of the photo-narrative.

Before Rukeyser’s work for *Coronet*, documentary, photo-textual magazine essays were primarily to be found in large-scale picture publications such as *Survey Graphic*, *Life*, *Time*, and *Fortune*, which set striking photographs depicting the state of the nation (supplied mostly by the federally funded Farm Security Administration [FSA])⁵ alongside descriptive and sociological text. These reports, which became known as “picture stories” or “photographic essays,” relied on the intersecting discourses of reportage, government propaganda, and aesthetics to create “stories told in pictures, organized so that the communication of ideas and emotions became most effective” (Stange 81). *Coronet* was consciously intellectual in partaking in this emergent form of journalism. The magazine would regularly feature an illustrated profile of a leading artist or photographer, in-

cluding the documentary photographers Margaret Bourke-White and Lewis Hine in the January and February 1939 issues respectively (163–74; 147–57). John Raeburn observed that *Coronet* presented its “portfolios” of images to approximate “a gallery show,” distinguishing itself from *Life* and *Look* “by making a lavish display of artful photographs rather than photojournalism its cornerstone” (196). During its run under David Smart between November 1936 and October 1961, *Coronet* proved to be a popular women’s magazine; one quarter of a million copies of its inaugural issue sold out in two days, and by 1940, although its circulation had begun to decline, it was still competing with *Esquire*, *Life*, and *Look*, selling in the region of 100,000 copies (Raeburn 196).

How Rukeyser came to provide the photo-narratives for *Coronet* is unclear, although she likely approached the publication with a proposal for a poetic portfolio format. Archival evidence also indicates her wish to become deeply involved in the production of photo-textual articles and stories for popular consumption in the magazines *Life* and *Holiday*, the latter of which Rukeyser approached as late as 1951 with suggestions for “a story of picture sequences”; it was to be informed by her work “with documentaries and exhibitions,” and emphasize “the excitement and strength” that had “hardly been discovered” of “writing with pictures” (qtd. in Gander 34). What is clear, however, is that Rukeyser selected the photographs for her 1939 photo-narratives from the freely available FSA file (from which she took one third of the images in “Worlds Alongside”) and from the *Coronet* archives, which held a variety of American and European photographs, including those from respected agencies such as Black Star (Gander 33).

Rukeyser’s use of both artistic and documentary photographs situates “Worlds Alongside” in a growing documentary sub-genre that connected the subjective and objective reading of images by taking Grierson’s definition of “the creative treatment of actuality” to different extremes. *Life* staff photographer Bourke-White and writer Erskine Caldwell’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), for example, extended the photo-essay format in the first collaborative American documentary photo-book of the 1930s. As William Stott has noted, Caldwell’s text, typical of the sociological journalese of the time, is both sentimental and detached (218), and the captions to the photographs reinforce the pitying, often condescending tone of the prose. The authors explain in the introduction: “The legends under the

pictures are intended to express the authors' own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed; they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of [the] persons" (Bourke-White and Caldwell n.p.). By installing their own persuasive rhetoric in place of their subjects' voices, the authors created a work that leaned heavily towards the subjective, artistic element in documentary. Bourke-White's photographic style also led to her frequent visual portrayal of subjects from dramatic, creative viewpoints. The artistry of the pictures complicates their status as documents of recorded fact, a dilemma compounded by their intended unification with fabricated "quotations."

Bourke-White and Caldwell's attention to human, facial encounter was symptomatic of the era's documentary aesthetic. Roy E. Stryker, head of the Photographic Division of the FSA, and responsible to a large extent for its ideological construction (Trachtenberg 57–58), noted after its closure: "the faces to me were the most significant part of the file" (qtd. in Wood 14). Consistently seeking portrait shots due to their perceived capacity to humanly involve the viewer as witness to the events depicted, Stryker believed that "a good documentary should tell not only what a place or a thing or a person *looks* like, but it must also tell the audience what it would *feel* like to be an actual witness to the scene" ("Documentary Photography" 1364, emphasis original). Lange's "Migrant Mother" image was perhaps the most singularly effective photograph of the era, reproduced numerous times in books, magazines, exhibitions, and posters. For Stryker, it was "*the* picture of Farm Security. . . . She has all the suffering of mankind in her but all of the perseverance too. . . . She is immortal" (qtd. in Wood 14, emphasis original). Paula Rabinowitz has written that Lange's "attention to the individual face" allowed the photographer to connect a single person's story with a national, historical narrative, in turn enabling a face such as the Migrant Mother's to transcend imagery to iconicity (87). Yet the facility of an image of a face to speak *for* a collective stems from its ability to speak *to* another: in the introduction to their 1939 documentary photo-book *An American Exodus*, Lange and sociologist Paul Taylor wrote in apparent opposition to Bourke-White and Caldwell, asserting their belief that by providing captions conveying their subjects' words verbatim, they had tried "so far as possible" to "let them speak to you *face-to-face*" (Lange and Taylor 15, emphasis original). By bringing a middle-class audience "*face-to-face*" with the dispossessed,

documentary photographers hoped to contrive a direct correlation between the “lens of the camera” and “the eye of the person looking at the print” (Rothstein 1357). However, since the dispossessed were frequently figured as representative types, it remains in contention whether the people involved in documentary image production did much to narrow the social and existential gap between the two “worlds”—that of those depicted in photo-books and that of those who read them.

Returning to “Worlds Alongside,” whose qualities of captivity and ambiguity I outlined above, we are therefore able to embed Rukeyser’s photo-narrative in a documentary tradition. Rukeyser’s use of the double-page spread, which contrives images to come face to face with each other as well as with the reader, coupled with her repeated employment of the human face to address our ways of looking critically, corresponds with the 1930s emphasis on facial confrontation. Yet Rukeyser’s use of the human face is far from straightforward or conventional. Additionally, the manner in which she writes the human face, aside from (or alongside) how she images it, requires closer examination. Before analyzing Rukeyser’s aesthetic practice of the face to face, it is important to note that her experiments for *Coronet* were in response to another attempt, made in 1938 by American poet Archibald MacLeish, to tell the story of Depression era America in words that faced pictures.

Land of the Free

In April 1938, Rukeyser reviewed MacLeish’s *Land of the Free* for the *New Masses*. A hybrid text of documentary photographs and poetic social comment, the book featured eighty-eight photographs, almost all of which were from the FSA file. Appreciating MacLeish’s intentions, but faulting him on his execution, Rukeyser utilized her review to proffer her own ideas on the creative potential and social use-value of the new image-text form.

Rukeyser felt profoundly that MacLeish’s endeavor was “adventurous and right.” She lauded the “strong dramatic sense” of his image arrangement and commented favorably on his extensive use of RA (FSA) images, extolling them as “excellent,” “pure,” and “brilliant.” She specifically celebrated the narrative quality of “individual portraits” among the selection, which allowed the reader to see, along with the “story of America spoiling

itself, the people this waste affects,” as well as “what happens to these people’s lives and faces” (“Review” 26). However, Rukeyser lamented the fact that the book fell short of its aspirations towards cinematic simultaneity and balance. MacLeish had admitted that he soon reversed his initial intention to write a Depression-era poem to which the photographs “would serve as commentary,” “so great was the power and stubborn inward livingness of these vivid American documents” (89). Instead, MacLeish positioned his text on the verso, under a horizontal blue line, labeled at the beginning of the book as “the sound track,” in an apparent effort to award it filmic fluidity. The poetic text is sparse and small; often, a single, short line faces a full-page photograph of a frowning or unsmiling face, a child in rags, an over-ploughed field, a migrating family, or a barren landscape. Underlining what he saw as the people’s bewilderment and suffering, MacLeish employs a refrain of uncertainty, repeated twenty times in variant form throughout the book. “We don’t know,” states the first page; “We aren’t sure” comprises the second. Jefferson Hunter has commented that MacLeish’s words render the photographs more melancholy than previously: “Faces of ordinary Americans which in other contexts might seem heroic here seem full of doubt” (83). The principal reason for this shift in affect is the juxtaposition of each photograph with a fragment of poetic commentary that presents the words as captions to the images. Lange’s “Migrant Mother,” for example, faces the line “Now we don’t know,” draining her image of the strength and stoicism with which it had elsewhere been imbued. Furthermore, through the repetitive use of the pronoun “we,” MacLeish not only imagines all Americans to think in a similar manner, but attempts, like Bourke-White and Caldwell, to speak for individuals who may not have shared his sentiments. By purporting to express the collective confusion and anxiety of the people photographed, MacLeish assumed knowledge of their plight and authority to speak on their behalf. The repeated refrain throughout *Land of the Free* of “we’re not talking” serves as an ironic reminder that MacLeish’s peroration excludes the voices of those pictured.

Rukeyser recognized that the problem with MacLeish’s book resided in the style, structure, and presentation of the poem, arguing that the poetic image-text form “deserved a new *kind* of poetry if it was really to carry itself along” (“Review” 27, emphasis original). The poem must therefore not rely on the photographs for message or movement, but, through a

meeting of textual forms and styles, collaborate with the images to create a new, communicative art form: “Here we need something like a poem, something like movie titles, something like news in lights around the *Times* building” (27). Ultimately, then, *Land of the Free* fails, in Rukeyser’s opinion, to confront the issues that it raises and, in so doing, fails to bring the reader face to face with an immediate social problem. This is in part due to MacLeish’s somewhat clumsy handling of the dilemma of the artistic and equal presentation of image and text. Believing that MacLeish’s work demonstrated “a great lack of balance” between the two, Rukeyser argued for “the cleanest, sharpest, most alive words we know to meet these faces and these scenes” (27). MacLeish had admittedly recognized the “stubborn inward livingness” of the photographs, but had not responded with words that matched their visual vigor. Rukeyser objected to the book’s puzzled, unsure refrain, stressing the need for “direct questions put after the ‘we wonder’” rather than continued uncertainty (28). For Rukeyser, inquiring after the direction of the country allowed the population to “ask all the questions we like, but to carry in our questions our wish; to show continually the lives of our own people under the times they carry” (28). The exclamatory statements of fact and vitality in “Worlds Alongside”—“Worlds living now!” features twice—indicate Rukeyser’s solution to the pervading feelings of doubt and dislocation in MacLeish’s text. Further, her decision to provide dual interpretations of contemporary existence connects to her wish for a more robust response to “these people’s lives and faces,” a more “balanced” representation of the “story of America spoiling itself” to combat MacLeish’s unequivocal perspective.

Dual Faces of American Existence

Rukeyser’s method of picture juxtaposition was unusual for the time; other photo-texts had not utilized paired, contrasting images on the double page (Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor published *An American Exodus* just after the photo-narratives). Like many photo-essays of the Depression era, Rukeyser’s presentation evokes concern for those regions of the country battered by drought and poverty. Unlike many photo-essays of the time, however, it does so by repeatedly highlighting difference and implying the relative wealth of the *Coronet* reader. Returning to Figure 2, for

example, under Lange's photograph of dry, barren landscape, Rukeyser evokes an American "sun" that "whips more flat the flat lands that have no features, no water, no grace, no reflections . . ." (84). Opposite, under the photograph of the ornate gothic spire, runs the line, "as the rich city has, racing tower against tower" (85). Rukeyser's text alludes to the "reflections" of the two towers on the window's glass as well as to the photographs' capacity, in collaboration with the text, to provoke contemplation. In simple terms, the images are ideological and aesthetic inversions of each other, opposite yet the same, with each needing the other to reinforce its meaning. Additionally, Rukeyser's observation that the "flat lands" have "no reflections" indicates both the lack of attention given to the poor by the "rich" and the comparatively uncivilized state of the poor in terms of technological advancement and architectural construction.

This dialectic is extended in the next pairing of a carefully composed Brassai photograph of a waiter, pouring rows of glasses full of red wine, and the less artful portrait of a rural worker, pouring water from a metal beaker into his mouth. Visual symmetry rests in the long, L-shaped table in the first image and the raised crook of the worker's arm in the second. Asymmetry rests in their representation of two different responses to the same human need: "we make cities out of the need for four walls and a door . . . and the two values live alongside each other, the elaborate gesture and the simplest motion" (86–87). In contrast to MacLeish, Rukeyser does not "wonder" what has happened to America as a nation, but asserts that the American people have made choices resulting in their nation's present state; the parallel "worlds" of wealth and poverty are living proof of the nation's impulse to segregate and discriminate. New Deal ideology, exemplified by the FSA file, sought to reform society collectively towards a national community (Pells 114). However, in "Worlds Alongside," Rukeyser highlights America's internal alterity ("we have that range in our own country"), encouraging her reader to confront both visually and morally an inherent, national duality.

Toward the end of the photo-narrative, after Rukeyser has given the reader time to "reflect" upon her topic, she reinforces this poverty-privilege dialectic with another photograph of Lange's, alongside a stock image of a man skiing at speed over a snow dune (Figure 6). Lange's large photograph is itself an image-text: the "Next time try the train—relax" roadside billboard stands in ironic juxtaposition to the weary migrant

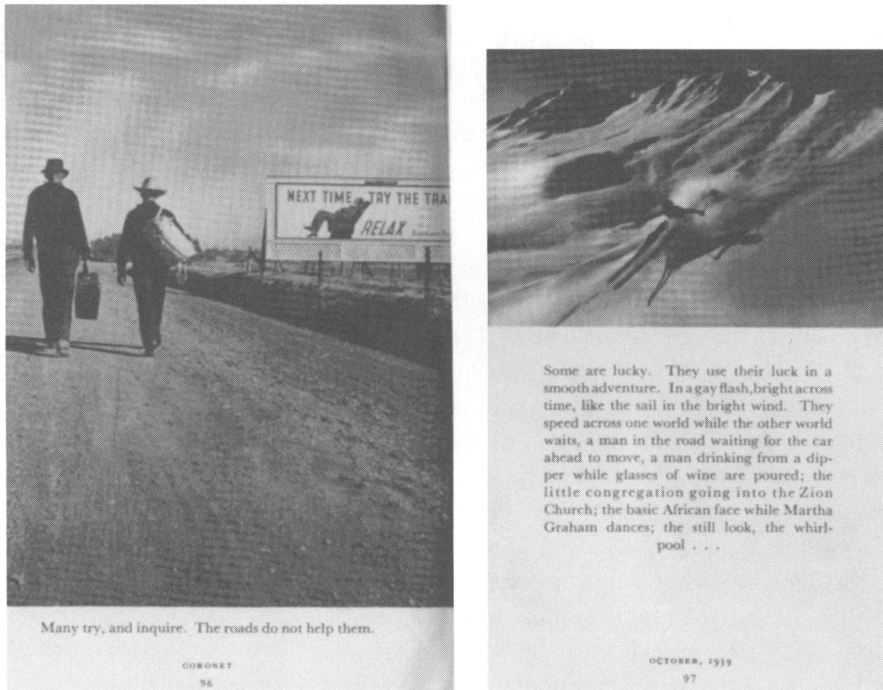


Figure 6: “Worlds Alongside,” *Coronet* Oct. 1939, pages 96–97. FSA photograph by Dorothea Lange (left) reprinted courtesy of the Library of Congress.

workers walking along the long dirt road. Positioned at the same height as the billboard, the photograph of the skier on the recto emphasizes the gulf between the states of the American economy pre-and mid-Depression, as well as the widening gap between the country’s wealthy and poor citizens. Rukeyser’s text underscores both the perseverance and lack of social mobility of the dispossessed: “Many try, and inquire. The roads do not help them” (96). Beneath the skier, she provides a summation of her photo-narrative, beginning with the sentence “Some are lucky” (97). These fortunate people “speed across one world while the other world waits, a man in the road waiting for the other car to move, a man drinking from a dipper while glasses of wine are poured . . .” (97). American existence, then, is split decisively in two: one “world” seems unfortunate, expectant, still; the other mobile, “rich” and “lucky.”

During the 1930s, a strong dichotomy arose between national perceptions of “culture” and “civilization” in America. Significant studies were given to the fact that “culture” was no longer considered to be “the highest achievements of men of intellect and art through history” (Susman 184), but rather, as Robert Lynd phrased it at the time, “all the things that a group of people inhabiting a common geographical area do, the ways they do things and the ways they think and feel about things” (19). Critics and writers of the 1930s came to equate the term “civilization,” in ideological opposition to the term “culture,” with urban-industrial growth, often considering it “the enemy” (Susman 188). The documentary turn towards the country’s agrarian victims of capitalism focused upon and romanticized American “folk” in accordance with their perceived honesty and lack of culpability in either capitalism or its collapse. FSA photographers helped to perpetuate the idea that such folk represented a more accurate portrait of American reality; the file, as Stryker was later to admit, was “more than a little bit sociology” (“The FSA Collection” 8).

Rukeyser’s discussion of “worlds alongside” is therefore fairly typical of the dialectical ideology characterizing documentary expression at the time. Her use of an anthropological photograph of an African tribal woman would also seem to correspond to the era’s rhetoric; however, by contrasting two human faces, one “primitive,” one “civilized,” on the central pages of the photo-narrative (Figure 4), Rukeyser reiterates her belief in the communicative and connective power of word and image to unite these supposed opposites:

These worlds alongside bring together faces:
the primitive waiting face that is ready to
receive history upon itself, a dark genesis for
us all. It lies beautiful and receptive, a living
rock . . .

and the finished face of the dancer turning
to her audience. (90)

This text appears on the verso, under a photograph of the upturned head of the young African woman, and opposite the full-page head and shoulders photograph of the dancer Graham. The photographs are positioned so that the women’s chins almost touch; indeed, as the reader closes the maga-

zine, the women's faces are brought closer to each other until they eventually merge, while remaining separate. As Graham's lips, nose, eyes, and forehead blend into those of the African woman, the reader may physically "bring together faces," a witness and a participant in the meeting of opposites that Rukeyser has staged.

By emphasizing the act of coming face to face, Rukeyser was responding to the somewhat contradictory relationship that documentary has with the human face as an ethical and phenomenological figure. This central pairing reveals Rukeyser's understanding of the importance of the face in the dynamic of difference, and as such, both contributes to and challenges notions of alterity and sameness. It is an attempt to create a dialogue without assimilation, between representatives of different "worlds." Rukeyser's terminology and approach bear striking correspondence to the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, whose theory of the "face to face" can further illuminate Rukeyser's construction and examination of national and personal selfhood and otherness.

Rukeyser's "Worlds Alongside" and Emmanuel Levinas' "Face to Face"

Although I can find no record of Rukeyser having read the work of Levinas, the terms that she employs to expound her theory of the poetic confluence of opposites are in many cases identical to those that Levinas employs to explain his interpretation of phenomenological ethics. Rukeyser did, however, read extensively the work of the philosopher and Zionist leader Martin Buber (1878–1965),⁶ whose writings Levinas listed as among his greatest influences (*Totality* 68–69; *Outside* 4–19). Buber structures his religious and social philosophy around the potential for intersubjective creativity within relationship and dialogue. Calling this transcendent dialogue a "meeting" between consciousnesses (*I and Thou* 43–62), Buber highlights the necessity of self-reflection to develop a "philosophical anthropology" in which "everything that is discovered about historical and modern man . . . must be built up and crystallized round what the philosopher discovers by reflecting about himself" (*Between* 34). Positing that the "fundamental fact of human existence is man with man," Buber states that this relation is "rooted in one being turning to another" (34). This communication is not reducible to the spoken word and exists in

what Buber terms “the sphere of the ‘between,’” a sphere in which “an ‘outer’ event and an ‘inner’ impression” come together to create a “third alternative” (39). Levinas was to carry Buber’s theory of intersubjective meeting into the philosophy of ethical relation.

Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity* explores the ethical position of the other as a precondition for self-knowledge. According to Levinas, the “notion of the face” opens a number of “perspectives” on the self and the other, whose ethical and phenomenological co-existence depends upon a relationship of irreducible difference (*Totality* 51). Similar to Buber’s fully participatory “philosophical anthropology,” Levinas’ theory of the face stresses the dangers of a purely observational approach to the other. Both modes of thought help us to understand how documentary discourses tended to objectify and possess the other under a voyeuristic gaze—for example, *You Have Seen Their Faces*—subsequently denying the self any reciprocal relation with alterity. They thus contributed to what Levinas terms “thematization and conceptualization”: inseparable modes of regarding that “are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other” (*TI* 46). Levinas argues instead for a comprehension of being that is commanded by the self’s relationship with the other. If we are to understand “the face” as “the way in which the other presents himself” (50), it follows that we are to understand the self within the general economy of the “face to face”: a meeting or “conversation” of immediacy, enacted at the level of reception. The other must not and cannot be reduced to the self-same, but must be met with an “openness” to alterity, “possible only starting from *me*” (39, 40, emphasis original).

When Rukeyser contrives the primitive and the sophisticated to meet face to face on the printed page, she appears to highlight alterity by means of proximity. The anonymous African woman is Graham’s literal and metaphorical neighbor, and through the face, Rukeyser reinforces and better conveys the otherness of each in a reciprocal dialogue of being. However, there exists in Rukeyser’s hybrid text a critical third element: that of the reader. The faces attest to what Levinas terms “the presence of a third party, the whole of humanity . . . the eyes that look at me,” for “the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity” (213). This “third party” must partake in the experience of the face to face, fulfilling the requirements of both observer and participant. In so doing, the “third party” experiences a selfhood that cannot be reached solely through the self, but

only via the responsive and responsible witness of an Other. Rukeyser's theory of poetic relation and Levinas' theory of ethical relation are comparable in their irreducibility to two components and in their dependence on the presence of a "third party," referred to by Rukeyser as the "witness."

In *The Life of Poetry* (1949), Rukeyser explains her preference for the term "witness" over "reader" or "audience" to express the tripartite relationship that she hoped to achieve in the poetic act of bringing together:

I suggest the old word "witness," which includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence. The overtone of responsibility in this word is not present in the others; and the tension of the law makes a climate here which is that climate of excitement and revelation giving air to the work of art, announcing with the poem that we are about to change, that work is being done on the self. (175)

Rukeyser theorizes that "work" may be "done on the self" via the assumption of "responsibility" for something outside the self. This "responsibility" in turn results from a visual and cognitive personal experience of the other. By positing that "these worlds alongside bring together faces," Rukeyser encourages her reader/witness to engage in the visual (and haptic) dialogue played out on the pages of her photo-narrative. Similar to Buber's hope for "a transformed understanding of the person and . . . of community" (*Between* 41) and Levinas' hope for an expression of ethical "justice" (*Totality* 72), Rukeyser's hope is for a "meeting-place" created from supposed opposites in which self and other are viewed face to face by each other and by a third party as equal but necessarily different.

Levinas also employs the word "witness," applying it to a being experiencing an immediate relation with another's vulnerability. This being recognizes vulnerability through proximity: involved in the other before it could have chosen to be involved and thereby bound to that other at a level of response and responsibility: "Proximity, difference which is non-indifference, is responsibility. It is a response without a question. . . . It is the passivity of exposure, a passivity itself exposed" (*Otherwise* 139). According to Levinas, I am claimed by the face of the other, and articulated as a responsible individual before I can articulate myself. The vulnerabil-

ity of the other is explicit in the nakedness of the face, which “presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger” (*Totality* 213). However, this stranger “presents himself as an equal” (213). Such equality arises from the face-to-face encounter. It begins with the ego “bearing witness of itself to the other” (*Otherwise* 119). The proximity of the other therefore calls forth its authority in the articulation of my own subjectivity. The other is irreducible to the self-same, but remains alongside me visibly and ethically: “It is my responsibility before a face looking at me as absolutely foreign . . . that constitutes the original fact of fraternity.” The face to face is thus “an ethical relation” (*Totality* 214); for both Rukeyser and Levinas, it is rooted in a dynamic of “witness” and “responsibility.”

Six of the photographs in Rukeyser’s “Worlds Alongside” are facial shots, and Rukeyser explicitly refers to the human face on five occasions in her narrative. Directly after the central facial combination, Rukeyser pairs Lange’s candid image of a migrant family’s arrested car journey with Rothstein’s more posed composition (Figure 3). The text layout under the latter image is as follows:

to the Virginia postmaster

at home in the evening. Crowded into his
corner is the record of effort that ends in
some buildings, a ritual of business, belief in
a god in the room, a few household objects,
and his face. (93)

In what appears to be the only piece of critical writing hitherto to address “Worlds Alongside,” Jefferson Hunter condemns Rukeyser’s use of documentary photographs as reinforcing the genre’s objectivizing ethos, asserting that the only observation that one can confidently make about her photo-narrative “is that it denies individuality to dwellers in the poor, simple world” by situating them as “fully interpreted and thus fully categorized” (143). However, in light of the photo-narrative’s central dilemma, highlighted at the beginning of this essay, we can more fully understand Rukeyser’s employment of image and text as both engaging in and questioning methods of categorization common to the period. For example, Rukeyser recognizes that the postmaster’s life may be documented and

summarized as a collection of fragments, all of them objects and all of them in some way perpetuating documentary photography's aesthetic of recorded objectification and mimetic reproductivity. "A few household objects" refers to a mirror and two lamps, figures of reflection and illumination essential to photographic technology and central metaphors in the aesthetics of representation; "some buildings" refers to pictures of monuments hanging on the wall; "belief in a god in the room" refers to another wall hanging of an image of a family meal (connoting the last supper), accompanied by a brief text reminding us of Christ's invisible omnipresence. By drawing attention to "belief in a god in the room," Rukeyser underlines the pluralization of god afforded by the mechanical reproduction of an iconic image that takes the place of the referent. The last element in this ironic "record of effort" comprises the last line of text. Rukeyser, in isolating and centering the final item in this otherwise meager catalogue of the postmaster's vital components of existence, aligns this line with the initial line, creating a visual symmetry that reads: "to the Virginia postmaster and his face" (93). Positioned thus, the text both salutes the subject and directs attention towards it. Likewise, in Levinasian theory, the face of the other both greets and summons the self towards a meeting.

Yet Rukeyser's ambiguous language also serves to frustrate a true "meeting" here. Does, for example, the postmaster's "belief" extend from "a god in the room" to "his face"? Or has "his face," despite Rukeyser's formal positioning of it outside the catalogue of objectified phenomenal existence, been thematized and collected by the documentarian in the same manner as have his "household objects"? Rukeyser built her understanding of the world and of poetry (the two are inseparable for Rukeyser) upon a philosophy of eye-witness that involves responsibility to the self and the other. An objectifying look can, in both Rukeyser's and Levinas' philosophies, suppress and possess the other, freezing the continuity of life and creating further distance between faces. Inability or refusal to respond responsibly to the other is equal to an inability to see the world and the self's place within it. Rukeyser's decision to position overleaf from this spread a full-page photograph of another anonymous face whose large, open eyes are discernibly blind may therefore be understood in the light of Levinas' ethical rhetoric.

Responsibility arises for Levinas and Rukeyser from "regard" as incor-

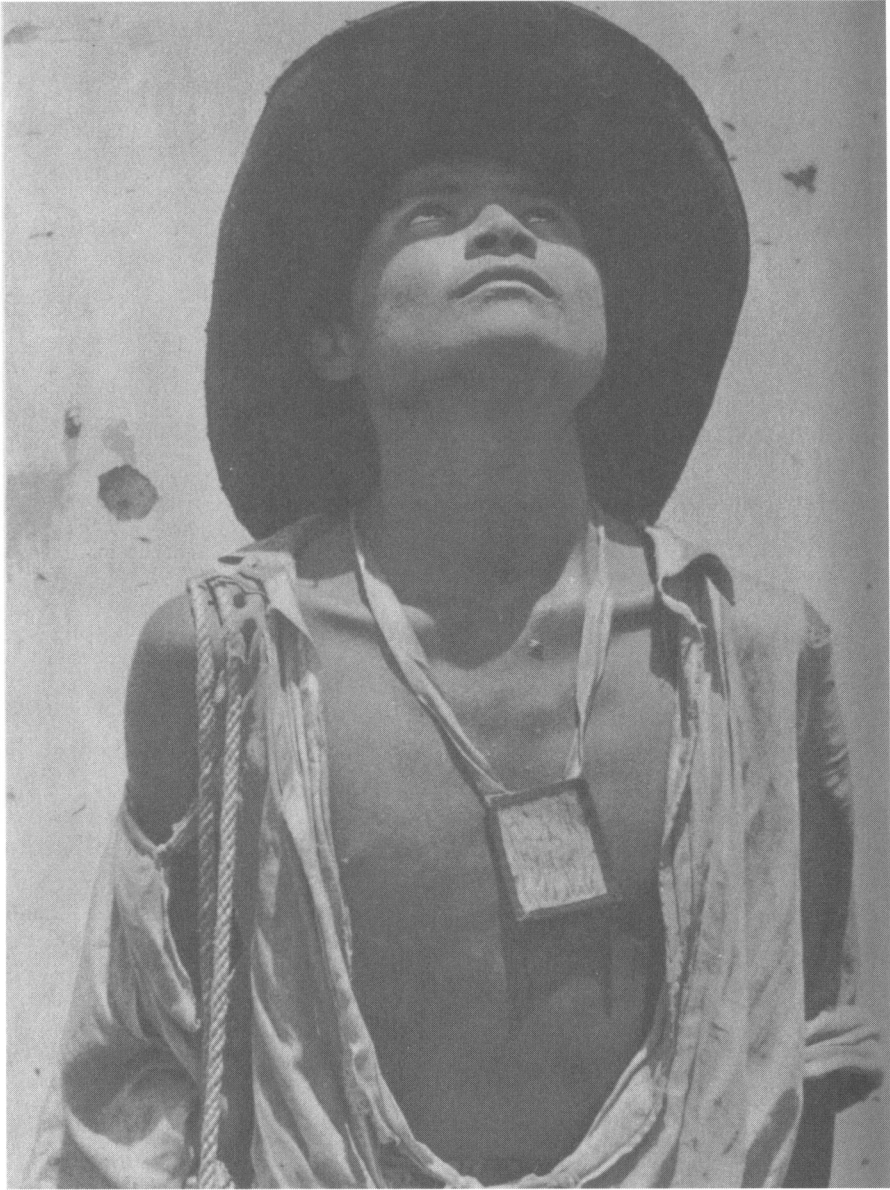


Figure 7: "Worlds Alongside," *Coronet* Oct. 1939, page 98. Photograph copyright unknown.

porating both a way of seeing and the act of giving particular care. Rukeyser's poetic caption labels the blind gypsy's face as "the still look," while beneath the opposite image of a whirlpool (resembling a large eye), the text responds with a reference to "the inward look of waters, carrying their currents" (Figure 5). Rukeyser's combination of image and text again alludes to ethical and poetical ways of looking at the world, which naturally include perception of both an outer event and an inner impression. Encountering the face of an Other provokes immediate introspection, and Rukeyser confirms that these dual elements of perception must "dance in unique balance" (95). The last image of the photo-narrative, Figure 7, indicates the necessity to consider the "look" of others and features what Rukeyser captions as "the Mexican boy in his look at the silver plane" (98).

The contrast of perspectives in these pictures and the narrative alongside them challenge the primacy of the viewing subject by constantly confusing and resisting the reader's inferences as to what the pictures mean. The narrative, in extending and questioning the photographs' meanings, provides a subtle interrogation of the reader/witness by encouraging a re-evaluation of his or her position within the dynamic of visual and ethical regard.

Language with or without Words: "The Face Speaks"

"Worlds Alongside" exhibits a symmetry and reciprocity that is largely absent from *Land of the Free*. Rukeyser took issue with what she understood as MacLeish's translation of, rather than response to, the faces in his chosen images: "He has taken these people's faces and translated the inarticulate physical life seen in them to a lost periodless quality" ("Review" 27). According to Levinas, the face-to-face encounter involves language prior to our own speaking. Before we can speak for ourselves or for others, "the face speaks":

The face is a living presence; it is expression. The life of expression consists in undoing the form in which the existent, exposed as a theme, is thereby dissimulated. The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse. He who manifests himself comes . . . to his own assistance.

He at each instance undoes the form he presents. (*Totality* 66)

Responsibility is interpreted by Levinas as response, which is in turn interpreted as *saying*, whether aloud or not. Levinasian theory posits that the communicability of the face transcends objectivity by involving a saying that is both the essence of being and the commencement of “the presence of exteriority in language” (302). Levinas terms this initial saying as an affirmative “‘Here I am,’” a command that issues from the face of the other to awaken one to response and responsibility (*Otherwise* 142–49). It is the exposure of the self to the other, a saying of the self, because “saying is witness, it is saying without the said, a sign given to the other” (150–51). Consequently, it is “a fraternity, a proximity that is possible only as an openness of self. . . . It is thus exposing of exposure . . . the one-for-the-other” (150–51).

In MacLeish’s chosen faces, the “physical life” is “inarticulate,” according to Rukeyser, because it is reduced to language of the self-same: the self as witness can only be called to respond to the other, not to speak in his or her place. MacLeish’s use of the first-person plural therefore differs from that of Rukeyser. MacLeish, unable realistically to include himself among the rural labor contingent of America realistically, represents both the other and himself in what Levinas terms “a borrowed light” (*Totality* 67). Rukeyser’s problem with MacLeish’s words is her belief that they are “in somebody else’s mouth” (“Review” 27). The pictorial-verbal imbalance of the book results from MacLeish’s inauthentic response to the faces that he encounters. Rukeyser’s use of “we,” as noted earlier, conveys a more modest, reproachful tone. In her review of *Land of the Free*, she argues that “[t]he ‘we’ so many critics suffer over is not so important, once the tone is there. The thing really is not to fall into the grandiose tone that is in another tradition altogether”—a tone that MacLeish amplifies with quotations from documents such as the Declaration of Independence. Her belief in the need “to supply the cleanest, sharpest, most alive words we know to meet these faces and these scenes” prefigures the ethical obligation that Levinas perceives in the human act of meeting.

However, whether Rukeyser succeeds in creating and sustaining textual-pictorial equilibrium in her photo-narratives is debatable. At times, her text constitutes an immediate response to the images, arguably allow-

ing the Levinasian “Here I am” quality of the face to manifest itself and affording a markedly different effect from that of the faces which MacLeish helped to thematize as “lost.” Additionally, the twice-occurring phrase “Worlds living now!” might be seen to undermine the “periodless” quality that Rukeyser thought MacLeish had given to the faces in *Land of the Free*. Yet it is difficult to believe that such a phrase, despite its emphasis on “living,” demonstrates what Rukeyser intended when she made a plea for the “cleanest, sharpest, most alive words we know” to accompany the FSA photographs. Furthermore, in an effort to expose the revelatory quality of the face-to-face encounter, Rukeyser must inevitably employ the photograph as representational symbol. While she avoids speaking for the other, the imagination governing her text represents the other as a poetic image. Rukeyser is thus unable to maintain a generosity towards the other’s face that is over and above its presentation as an image, and although at times she transcends visual objectification, or at least points the way to its transcendence, there exists within “Worlds Alongside” occasional slippage into thematization of and condescension towards the perceived other. “The face of the Other,” asserts Levinas, “at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me” (*Totality* 51). By employing the static image of the photograph as a means of overcoming the distancing effect of an objectivizing vision, Rukeyser risks reducing alterity to symbolism, a risk augmented by her at times fixing the other as type. This tendency is most evident in the central pairing of the faces of Graham and the young African woman, to whom Rukeyser refers as “primitive.”

The Primitive

In his short critique of “Worlds Alongside,” Hunter rightly refers to the pictured African woman as “portentously symbolic” (143). Approached on Levinasian terms, her face embodies Graham’s confrontation with irreducible alterity, and Rukeyser’s description of it as “ready . . . beautiful and receptive” offers a lesson in the open “passivity” that Levinas states is necessary for an ethical and phenomenological encounter with the other (*Otherwise* 139). Moreover, the face’s readiness to “receive history upon itself” situates it beyond the province of systematic knowledge that Levinas terms “totality.” It is before and without history and, as such, a sym-

bol of “infinity” which may insinuate itself into my world as my interlocutor (Wyschogrod 190). In short, the face is necessarily my self’s precondition. However, Rukeyser’s further characterization of the “primitive” face as “a dark genesis for us all” and “a living rock” defines the image according to the terms of a primitivist aesthetic inherited from the 1920s, and situates it within the burgeoning visual-anthropological discourse of the period.

By alluding to an ideological location of the “primitive” in a more innocent, irretraceable past, Rukeyser’s narrative contributes to the era’s fascination with the exoticism of the cultural Other, established by Robert Flaherty’s founding documentary film *Nanook of the North* (1922) and anthropological texts such as Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (1928). The cultural theorist Lila Abu-Lughod has argued that “the Western civilized self was constituted in part through this confrontation with and picturing of the savage or primitive other” (24). By formally picturing a confrontation between the face of the African woman and “the finished face of the dancer,” Rukeyser would appear to underline the progressive civilization of the “Western self.” Her characterization of the “primitive” as “beautiful” and “a living rock” contributes to an established primitivist rhetoric that figured the other in romantic, natural terms. Additionally, the photographs’ layout contrives the African to gaze upwards to Graham, who appears to look down upon her. However, Rukeyser’s utilization of such imagery involves a conflict between established perceptions and new creative perspectives.

Fatimah Tobing Rony has written of the “redemption motif of anthropology,” the motif of the primitive as an uncorrupted example of the values of the West: fraternity, independence, and perseverance (131). Indeed, contemporary filmmakers and critics alike were aware of films such as *Nanook* representing a “romantic desire to summon, preserve for posterity, the purity and ‘majesty’ of a way of life not yet spoiled by the advance of civilization” (Kracauer 273). The impulse of the 1930s towards aligning the agrarian, land-laboring life with “culture,” in opposition to an urban-industrial “civilization,” at times found expression in crude anthropological terminology. Yet the term “primitive” was also used pejoratively. Caldwell, for example, marveled at the ability of tenant farmers to get by on so

little, calling them “primitive” and “savage,” concluding, “but they are still people” (Bourke-White and Caldwell 168).

In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser writes of the “primitive” in terms of the romantic aesthetic of redemptive lesson: “We can understand the primitive—not as the clumsy, groping naïf of a corrupted definition, or even the unskilled ‘unsophisticate’ of modern aesthetic usage—for what he was and what we have to be: the newborn of an age, the pioneer, Adam who dares” (177). For Rukeyser, then, a “primitive” sensibility was commensurate with an archetypal, American pioneer spirit. Criticizing those modern poets (including MacLeish) who “go blaming, blaming,” and “who emerge with little but self-pity,” Rukeyser endorses a poetics that relies on moral responsibility and expansive inclusion rather than on “the smallness of things” (176). This responsibility is founded upon “the only things with survival value”: “our relation to each other and to ourselves” (177).

The “primitive” thus comprises a poetical and anthropological motif of expansion and experiment for Rukeyser: “a source in ourselves which we had almost lost.” It is in this capacity that she characterizes “the primitive waiting face” as primordial, “a dark genesis for us all.” In the “newborn of an age” resides the potential to return to the reality of the world. Rukeyser believed that this reality was only half-seen in her lifetime—a “century” that, in her own words, had “only half-prepared us to be primitives” (*Life of Poetry* 177). Believing that “the time requires our full consciousness, humble, audacious, clear” (177), Rukeyser argued for a return to a primitive state of being whose receptivity and capacity for direct experience she figured ten years earlier in the visual and verbal repetitions of “Worlds Alongside.” The “waiting face” of the “primitive” is echoed in the migrant who is “waiting for the car ahead to move” and the upturned face of the Mexican boy in his look at the symbol of “civilization,” a “silver plane” (“Worlds Alongside” 92, 98).

Meaning in Combination: The Photo-Narrative as Montage

By layering meaning in face-to-face encounters, Rukeyser wished to locate her photo-narrative among “the only things with survival value,” aiming to create the “new kind of poetry” that she had hoped for in MacLeish’s text (“‘We Aren’t Sure’” 27). Her technique of juxtaposing photographs without an apparently logical sequence, photographs from a

variety of locations, times, and sources, differentiated “Worlds Alongside” from the photo-essays published in other picture magazines of the time. The resulting fragmentary effect, representing a conflation of multiple viewpoints, alludes to documentary film’s origins in the montage experiments of Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov, whose “kino-eye” method during the 1920s sought to capture moments of life—“bits of energy”—and edit them into a “tectonic whole” (Michelson 20). Having worked in film editing and production during the 1930s, Rukeyser was aware that “selection and ordering are a work of preparation and equilibrium” (*Life of Poetry* 143). Likening the frame of a film to the image of a poem, Rukeyser notes in *The Life of Poetry* that “the single image, which arrives with its own speed, takes its place in a sequence which reinforces that image” (143). Her preferred term for this sequence was “cluster” or “constellation”: a “gathering-together of elements so that they move together according to a newly visible system” (19). “Worlds Alongside” enacts this “gathering-together”: a collection of “elements” and ideas whose ideological and philosophical relations are linked by the dynamics of looking, and reinforced by their spatial relations.

In this way, “Worlds Alongside” also recalls the montage work of another Soviet filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein. Rukeyser writes at length about Eisenstein’s methods of image and text combination in *The Life of Poetry*, and her citations of his 1942 book, *The Film Sense*, in her acknowledgments indicates a significant alignment between her poetics and Eisenstein’s theory of technical and formal montage (215). Additionally, the Rukeyser archives contain several handwritten notes taken from chapter one of Eisenstein’s *Film Sense*, especially the 1939 seminal essay “Word and Image” (originally published in *Iskusstvo Kino* as “Montage in 1938”). Rukeyser was actively involved in the American publication of *The Film Sense*, providing the translation of Arthur Rimbaud’s *Voyelles* [Vowels], which is included in chapter two, “Synchronization of Senses,” of the English-language version of the book (Gander 100). Originally published in the year after “Worlds Alongside” appeared, Eisenstein’s “Word and Image” advocates the juxtaposition “of two facts, two phenomena, two objects” to combine into “a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition” (Eisenstein 14). For Eisenstein, this combination “resembles a creation—rather than a sum of its parts,” whereby “the whole emerges perfectly as ‘a third something’” (17, 19). Defining the “third

something” as a creative energy that draws the “spectator” into the very process of creation, Eisenstein employs language strikingly similar to Rukeyser’s own on the subject of witnessing “the image of the theme itself” (19):

The strength of the method resides also in the circumstance that the spectator is drawn into a creative act in which his individuality is not subordinated to the author’s individuality, but is opened up throughout the process of fusion with the author’s intention. (35)

Eisenstein’s description recalls both Rukeyser’s and Levinas’ expression of ethical visual encounter, whereby the combination of elements gives way to an openness and receptivity over and above assimilation. It also prefigures Rukeyser’s description of “witness” in *The Life of Poetry* as an act of creative exchange whereby “work is being done on the self” (175). Rukeyser writes that in the combination of images and words, “there are separables: the meaning of the image, the meaning of the words, and a third, the meaning of the two in combination. The words are not used to describe the picture, but to extend its meaning” (137). Her theory of the creative energy generated from such a combination recalls Buber’s “sphere of the between” in its “third alternative,” and Levinas’ notion of the irreducible distinctness of the self and other: “The relation with the Other does not nullify separation. It does not arise within a totality nor does it establish a totality, integrating me and the other” (*Totality* 251). While Rukeyser probably developed her ideas regarding image and word combination from her experience of Eisenstein’s book on the same subject, her “Worlds Alongside” does represent, a year before the publication of Eisenstein’s “Word and Image,” a pioneering effort in montage aesthetics and poetics.

Rukeyser’s commitment to montage innovation extended to her work for the Office of War Information (OWI), where she worked as Visual Information Specialist between 1942 and 1943, creating poster campaigns in support of the American war effort. Upon her resignation from the OWI, prompted by her disappointment in the capitalist forces that guided it, Rukeyser wrote the essay “Words and Images” (1943), in which she describes the pairing of word and image as “one of the cleverest means of

communication” (140). Here, Rukeyser stated publicly for the first time the conviction that had infused her work for *Coronet*. Noting that her aim was to create something akin “to what dialogue does to a movie,” Rukeyser asserts: “The point is not in the *naming* of a picture, but in a reinforcement which is mutual, so that the words and picture attack the same theme from slightly different approaches” (140, emphasis original). She invested her belief that “poetry can extend the document,” first voiced in an endnote to *U.S.1* (1938), in the printed word’s capacity to “enlarge the context” of a visual image (*Collected* 604). The reciprocal work done by words and images must also possess that quality which MacLeish had strived to achieve: enough synchrony and balance to put one in mind of film.

This balance is contrived in various ways in “Worlds Alongside.” The only double-page spread to feature four images situates photographs above and below a thin ribbon of text, which runs horizontally across the pages’ center (Figure 8). The ribbon resembles a strip of film negative, with the monochromes of the words and their background reversed, and Rukeyser seems to allude to the technical aspects of still photography whilst simultaneously creating a sense of motion in the text’s progression across the spread. The words of the poem reinforce the parallelism with which the entire photo-narrative is concerned: “We freeze into placeless art the shadows and bright waves . . . and out of poverty-thin religion we raise up Mont St. Michel” (88–89). Carved into stone in the first photograph, and arrested by the camera in the sailing photograph beneath, are the “bright waves” of water, which Rukeyser associates with the fluidity of life. Rukeyser appears to struggle with her meanings here: her choice of the word “freeze” indicates a certain lament at art’s tendency to remove and isolate moments from time, yet her depiction of the rush and motion of life in a photograph of a speeding yacht undermines, or at least complicates, her own message. No matter how dynamic the photograph’s angle and composition allow it to be, the image remains a frozen representation of life. Additionally, the homophony of the word “freeze” with “frieze” refers not only to the nature of the artwork figured in the first picture, but also to the narrative, as it provides a band of textual decoration across the pages. It is in this frieze-like capacity of the words, in their short statement of fact, that they become “something like a poem . . . something like news

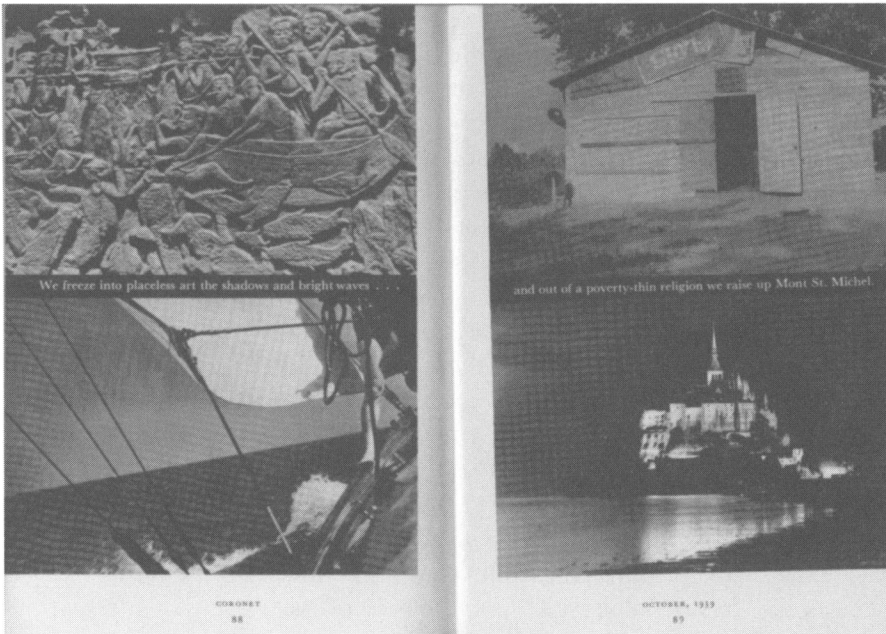


Figure 8: “Worlds Alongside,” *Coronet* Oct. 1939, pages 88–89. FSA photograph by Lange (top right) reprinted courtesy of the Library of Congress. Other copyright unknown.

in lights around the *Times* building,” their white color against a black setting evoking the luminescent lettering of moving headlines.

Rukeyser replaces the *Times* building with two churches in the picture spread, implying that the splendor of Mont St. Michel is constructed upon unstable moral foundations, a “poverty-thin religion.” Lange’s image of a small clapboard church, displaying a welcome sign above its open door, depicts a structurally unsound, rudimentary spiritual shelter. At the end of the photo-narrative, Rukeyser imagines a “little congregation going into the Zion church,” categorizing the worshippers among the collective “world” that “waits” whilst people in “the other world” “use their luck” to “speed across” it (97). Rukeyser’s style throughout, and especially in this last passage, approaches journalese, prompting Hunter to dismiss those parts of the text in which Rukeyser writes “as if she were still writing for *New Masses*” (142). However, any critical examination of “Worlds Along-

side” must account for how the work constitutes an experimental contribution to an ongoing ethical and aesthetical project, inseparable from documentary discourse, itself an evolving and shifting term in the 1930s and 1940s. The innovation of Rukeyser’s approach to established means of visual reportage should not be downplayed.

John Berger has written of the prohibitive nature of the standardized, singular perspective “reportage photo-story,” noting that for journalists “to speak of their experience with images it would be necessary to introduce pictures of other events and other places, because subjective experience always connects. Yet to introduce such pictures would be to break the journalistic convention” (279). Rukeyser’s aim was to create a “poetry of meeting-places” by breaking such a “convention,” and her disappointment at the lack of risk-taking in combinative works of text and image relates to her lament at a general and pervasive “fear of poetry”: “Editors have grown timid,” she writes in *The Life of Poetry*, “a brave advance is almost inevitably followed by quick back-tracking, generally by dilution and debasement of the original intention” (140). The montage cluster of diverse images in “Worlds Alongside” is indicative of the variety of life and the occasions for contact that it creates. Joined by the common “themes” of visuality and connection, the photographs refer and respond to each other, both across the double-paged spread and beyond it: the face of the postmaster recalls the faces of the African, the dancer, and the blind gypsy, and “the Mexican boy in his look” on the last page recalls the “inward look” of the whirlpool, the “still look” of the woman, and our own act of looking at them all. This internal cross-referencing generates what Eisenstein calls “the image of the theme itself” that “binds together all the details into a whole” (19). Berger explains that the photo-story narrates “through montage”: “the energy of the montage of attractions in a sequence of still photographs destroys the very notion of *sequences*. . . . The sequence has become a field of co-existence like the field of memory” (288, emphasis original). Rukeyser’s intention is to bring a “field of co-existence” into her readers’ field of vision. Encountering the photographs in this way restores them to life by enlarging their context to what Berger labels “a context of experience” in which “their ambiguity at last becomes true” (289). Apart from the almost immediate historical memory of the widely circulated FSA photographs, the photographs in the photo-narrative possess the quality of historical and psychological memory in their connection to the prim-

itive. In this capacity, some of the images that Rukeyser employs extend beyond the objective document to engage the viewer/witness in a reflection on the nature of the image itself.

The Hypericon

Rukeyser employs the image as communicative symbol of the real, an approach that may be helpfully read through the picture theory of W.J.T. Mitchell. Raphael Allison has referred briefly to Mitchell's writings on ekphrasis to support his reading of Rukeyser's poem "Ajanta." Citing Mitchell's "ekphrastic hope" of "the overcoming of otherness" as principle of Rukeyser's poetics, Allison astutely argues for her engagement with pragmatism and its association with graphic representation, although his neglect of the exemplary photo-narratives indicates their unfortunate obscurity (12). Rukeyser's narratives are not ekphrastic; however, Mitchell's notion of the visual image's narrativity does provide a model against which to read Rukeyser's choice of photographs.

Mitchell gives the term "hypericon" to dialectical "figures of figuration" such as Plato's cave, Aristotle's wax tablet, and the camera obscura (158). These, he asserts, "provide our models for thinking about all sorts of images—mental, verbal, pictorial and perceptual" (6). The hypericon thus signals the possibility of interplay between the subjective and the objective, philosophy and metaphor, science and art—an interplay that makes it easier to see how Rukeyser iconographically manifests her own poetics of relationship in the photo-narratives. According to Mitchell, hypericons occur whenever "the nature of images becomes a subject for philosophical reflection" on human nature (*Iconology* 158). Notwithstanding the authoritative statement in Rukeyser's text about how "we" as humans, and, more specifically, "we" as Americans, behave, her images comprise in themselves an ethical and philosophical comment on our being-in-the-world. The best example is the double-paged spread of the blind face and the whirlpool. These images represent what Mitchell calls "multistable" or "metapictures": images which specifically indicate their own ambiguity and openness to interpretation (*Picture Theory*, chapter 2). Mitchell contends that "multistable images are also a staple feature in anthropological studies of so-called 'primitive art,'" including art that figures "profiles or frontal views" of faces, given that they generate the

“‘fort-da’ or ‘peek-a-boo’ effect” (45–46). Understanding primitiveness to mean a self-awareness that invites introspection, Mitchell posits that “metapictures” are primitive “in their function as reflections on the basic nature of pictures,” that they “show themselves in order to *know* themselves: they stage the ‘self-knowledge’ of pictures” (48, emphasis original).

Rukeyser’s images reflect both on the nature of pictures and on the nature of looking at pictures. The gypsy’s face is overwhelming in its nearly life-size immediacy. The smaller photograph of the whirlpool is pictured at the woman’s eye-level, an arrested swirl of motion with a black, pupil-like abyss at its center. That these images prompt us to address the theme of visibility is clear; what remains unclear is *how* we should address it. Yet questionability is a defining aspect of the metapicture: “if the multistable image always asks, ‘what am I?’ or ‘how do I look?’, the answer depends on the observer asking the same questions” (48). Blurring the line between figuration and abstraction in the same way as she challenges established relations between images and words, Rukeyser engages the “observer” in a dialogue of interrogation wherein boundaries between the objective and the subjective are constantly shifting. Significantly, Mitchell notes that “the figure of the whirlpool” is the multistable image *par excellence* in that it suggests a way of picturing the “‘Vortex Effect’” of metapictures. The image greets and pulls the beholder into a dialogue and, in so doing, “enfolds the observer as object for the ‘gaze’ of the picture” (75). We are therefore able to approach the ultimate image in “Worlds Alongside” from a multiplicity of perspectives, the preceding figures preparing us to question the nature of looking and of appearance.

Rukeyser speculates that the upward-looking Mexican boy is contemplating a silver plane. Whether we take her word for the picture is not the point. The image as multistable, hieroglyphic icon depends on our own reflection upon *how* the boy is looking (ambiguity intended). If he sees a plane, is he, in the manner of a primitive, awed and impressed? Does he lament the rapid progressions of modernity? Or is he raising his eyes in prayer? As Mitchell attests, “the words ‘reflection,’ ‘speculation,’ and ‘theory’ indicate [that] there is more than a casual relation between visual representation and the practice called theorizing” (82). Rukeyser draws attention to this relation, contriving her reader to become witness to “worlds”

where, as Berger asserts, “appearances become the language of a lived life” (289).

Rukeyser explains the image as symbol in her prose biography *Willard Gibbs* (1942), which she was researching at the time that she published the photo-narratives. Applauding Charles Baudelaire’s idea of “the universal analogy,” she describes her hope “not only for symbols that may be related to other symbols, but for meanings that are hieroglyphs of the world” (*Willard Gibbs* 81). Believing that these meanings exist in meeting-places between ostensible opposites, for example, “where scientist and poet share the world,” Rukeyser argues for a “combined power” that “does not call for a knowledge of types alone, but for a search among deviations” (82). In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser cites the spiral as the prime example of such a universal symbol in its combination of organic, scientific, and imaginative elements. Rukeyser gives the spiral many names: “the life-giver and carrier, the whirlpool, the vortex of atoms, and the sacred circuit” (37). With its origins in the imitation of natural forms, the spiral represents both an organic process and the development of creative imagination. As such, the spiral contains “the history of human passion for a relationship” and “an expression of the most deep connection” (38). Rukeyser’s recourse to symbolism within the photo-narratives, especially her use of the whirlpool as connective figure of inward and outward “look,” documents the emergence of what would endure as the defining ethos of her poetics. “The emphasis,” Rukeyser asserted, is “where it must be, in spite of all specialization: on *combining*” (*Willard Gibbs* 82, emphasis original). The meeting of “separates” incites a creative potential that Rukeyser recognizes as an analogy for poetry. In these moments, new images are formed, images which provide lessons in the ethical relations between human beings. Fear of poetry is thus fear of new combinations: “This is the knowledge of communication, and it is the fear of it which has cut us down. Our lives may rest on this; and our lives are our images” (*Life of Poetry* 40).

A Concluding Note

Rukeyser’s photo-narrative format was discontinued after two issues. In response to an editorial request for reader reaction to the new photo-essay format asking whether Rukeyser’s “treatment implement[ed] the photo-

graph as a significant commentary on human existence” (*Coronet* 120) the majority of replies were negative.⁷ Such reader feedback allows us to comprehend the difficulty that Rukeyser had in introducing her imaginative new method of communication to a public audience, which resoundingly requested a return to the separatist attitudes against which Rukeyser was reacting. Yet the photo-narratives, despite their faults and their cool public reception, remain an important example of Rukeyser’s early aesthetics not least because they illustrate many aspects of the poet’s work and philosophy in gestation. In addition, they upset generally accepted models of the 1930s documentary photo-text, highlighting an ethical and ontological element that had hitherto been given very little critical consideration. That the photo-narratives are unrepresentative of Rukeyser’s most sophisticated work is partly due to their status as experiments. As Rukeyser noted, “the process of combining depends on experimentation. Knowledge and effective action here become one gesture; the gesture of understanding the world and changing it” (*Willard Gibbs* 82). “Worlds Alongside” was one such gesture.

Notes

1. I would like to extend warm thanks to Nadia Charbit, for granting permission to use the “Gitane” image, to Bill Rukeyser, for his continuing support and generosity, to the Library of Congress, with whose permission I quote from the Muriel Rukeyser Papers and reproduce a number of Farm Security Administration (FSA) images, to Elisabeth Däumer, for her astute editorial comments and suggestions, and to the University of Edinburgh Press for permission to reprint extracts from my book, *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection* (2013), in which a part of this essay has been published in different form in chapter 2.
2. The photograph credit lists Figure 1 as a Resettlement Administration image and, therefore, an American subject.
3. Barthes explains a photograph’s *punctum* in contradistinction to its *studium* in *Camera Lucida* (1980, trans. 1981). The latter is the “average affect” (26) of the photograph, constructed out of various cultural contexts, whereas the former is the sharp and unexpected “wound” caused by a certain element of the photograph’s visual field: “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me [but also bruises me, is poignant to me]” (27).

4. See the June 18, 1967 draft preface for Rukeyser's *The Speed of Darkness* in the Muriel Rukeyser Papers (MRP) at the Library of Congress, Box One, Container 23 (1:23).
5. The Photography Unit of the FSA (1937–1944), headed by Roy E. Stryker, was called Resettlement Administration from 1935 to 1936.
6. Rukeyser's papers contain numerous references to the work of Buber dating from the early 1950s (MRP 1:21). In 1961, she acknowledged the debt that her poetics owed to Buber's thought in a footnote to the publication of the poem "Akiba" in *American Judaism* (April 1961), 13.
7. The responses were never printed. See the Muriel Rukeyser Papers for the forwarded replies (1:5).

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