

Environmental Justice Witnessing in the Modernist Poetry  
of Lola Ridge, Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Elizabeth Bishop

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Environmental Justice Witnessing in the Modernist Poetry of Lola Ridge, Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Elizabeth Bishop* analyzes the poetic forms used by four modernist American women poets to trace depictions of social oppression that are tied to specific landscapes. My focus is on what I term "environmental justice witnessing," which I define as accounts that testify to experiences of injustices that affect humans and the environments they inhabit. Integrating theories of witnessing, which to date have focused exclusively on humans, with environmental justice criticism, I fashion a lens that highlights the interconnectedness of social and environmental problems. In this way, I theorize the study of texts of witness and how they document the decay, disease, and exploitation of urban and rural landscapes in the twentieth century. In this dissertation, I focus on Lola Ridge's "The Ghetto" (1918), Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" (1938), Gwendolyn Brooks' "In the Mecca" (1968), and poems about Brazil from Elizabeth Bishop's *Questions of Travel* (1965) and *New Poems* (1979). I argue that these women poets depict environmental injustices as an inherent facet of social injustice and do so by poetically connecting human bodies to environmental bodies through sound, diction, figurative language, and imagery.

In *Environmental Justice Witnessing*, I expand arguments made by environmental scholars about the exchange of environmental elements among humans, animals, and landscapes to include the way poets reflect this transfer poetically. The poetry of Ridge, Rukeyser, Brooks, and Bishop allows me to investigate the ways the categories of race, gender, and class, typically thought of as human qualities, are integrally tied to the geographic, national, and cultural bounds in which those categories are formulated. This

argument has clear implications on the study of poetry and its environmental contexts as it invites discussions of the transnational conceptions of global citizenship, examinations of the relationships among communities, the environment, and overarching power structures, and arguments surrounding the ways that poetry as art can bring about long-term social and environmental awareness.

## DEDICATION

In memory of my great-grandmothers, Elizabeth Merrill Ford and Grace Ardell Berscht,  
an artist and a reader.

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## INTRODUCTION

“The double meaning of witnessing—*eyewitness* testimony based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and *bearing witness* to something beyond recognition that can’t be seen, on the other—is the heart of subjectivity. The tension between eyewitness testimony and bearing witness both positions the subject in finite history and necessitates the infinite response-ability of subjectivity.”

—Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*

“[Poetry] will have to be judged, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of confessions, by its consequences, not by our ability to verify its truth. In fact, the poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence. As such, there will be nothing for us to base the poem on, no independent account that will tell us whether or not we can see a given text as being ‘objectively’ true. Poem as trace, poem as evidence.”

—Carolyn Forché, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*

In 1933, as part of his New Deal, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created what was then called the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to encourage economic growth after the Great Depression. In the years that followed, the WPA’s Federal Art Project (FAP) and the Federal Emergency Education Project hired the recently widowed Elizabeth Merrill Ford to paint murals at the Mount Vernon Elementary School, Fort Dearborn Education Building, the Vanderpoel School, Erkskine College, and Superior Tea Room, which were all located in neighborhoods on the South Side of Chicago.<sup>1</sup> These murals depict both America’s past as well as visions for the country’s future. The murals at Mount Vernon Elementary School feature George Washington on horseback as he returns to Mount Vernon and Abraham Lincoln with a log cabin in the background, dogs at feet, and books in his arms. Both men appear in rural scenes with animals. Ford’s murals *History of American Progress* (four panels) and *Century of Progress* (eight panels) were located in the auditorium at Fort Dearborn Elementary. These scenes feature

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<sup>1</sup> Ford was hired to create costumes and sets for shows associated with federally funded arts projects during this time as well.

the history of America, specifically Chicago, and include city scenes that highlight new buildings and technology.

The Federal Art Project was founded on the idea that funding artists had the benefits of improving and beautifying the country while helping citizens find work: “The FAP developed projects in art, theater, music, and writing from 1935-1943. Roughly five thousand artists nationwide created some 108,000 easel paintings, 17,700 sculptures, and 2,500 murals” (Gray xxvi). The Federal Writers’ Project, another branch of the WPA, hired writers for projects, most notably a series of guide books about the United States “as a way of rediscovering America whilst reaffirming its traditions and values” (Gander). Poet Muriel Rukeyser published her book *US 1* in the same year and with the same title as the first guidebook. The results of projects such as these reflect American attitudes towards culture, nationhood, identity, and history in the early decades of the twentieth century.

On a personal note, the Chicago murals came to my attention because Ford is my maternal great-grandmother. My interest in her art is not merely familial, however, as her work reflects themes that run throughout this dissertation. As a woman, her abilities as an artist allowed her to gain recognition that in other professions she would have been denied based on her gender. The murals she created illustrate the role art plays as remedy—personally, as it provided her with income after the death of her husband, and nationally, as these projects gave struggling Americans jobs. Further, Ford’s life and art demonstrate a constant belief in the necessity of community support; her work as the director of recreation for the Chicago Park Systems, as well as her paintings of those parks, indicate an awareness of the interconnectedness of the human and natural worlds.

Visibility and the legacy of art are also of central concern in this dissertation. Though Ford appears in the 1940 *Who's Who in American Art*, her work is nearly forgotten today and that is in many ways due to the decay, deterioration, and demolition of the public buildings in which her murals appeared. This is the case with more than a third of the projects created as part of FAP: "From 1935 to 1943 over four hundred murals were commissioned by the Federal Art Project of the WPA for schools and public buildings in the Chicago area. About two-thirds have survived" (Gray 345). Much of this art witnesses to the hardships that faced Americans after World War I and the Great Depression; it illustrates the political, social, and cultural climate of the day, bringing to light the country's dreams for the future while also portraying the hardships and injustices many populations suffered during this period.

### **A Poetics of Environmental Justice Witnessing**

This dissertation discusses socially and environmentally engaged poetry of the early to mid-twentieth century that aims to incite awareness and, at times, action from readers. I focus on the poetry of four women poets writing in what is broadly called the modernist period of American literature: Lola Ridge, Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Elizabeth Bishop. As part of the first generation of modernist writers, Ridge examines and depicts cultural issues that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rukeyser, Brooks, and Bishop, on the other hand, belong to the period that is often referred to as late modernism. All four use poetry as a way to bear witness to specific social issues of their eras. In depicting an injustice suffered by humans, each poet

registers alarm over ways that unsafe, unhealthy, and unjust environmental practices cause systemic injustice and violence.

The concept of witnessing, a person's ability to respond and give testimony to traumatic or unjust events, is of paramount importance to my argument in this dissertation. The term "witness" carries the dual meanings that Kelly Oliver argues for in the above epigraph that begins this introduction: (1) to observe as an eyewitness and (2) to bear witness as someone testifying to something beyond observable recognition. In the title poem "The Book of the Dead," Rukeyser implores her readers:

Carry abroad the urgent need, the scene,  
to photograph and to extend the voice,  
to speak this meaning.

Voices to speak to us directly. As we move.  
As we enrich, growing in larger motion,  
this word, this power. (110)

Rukeyser's choice of language suggests many of the themes of this dissertation: dissemination ("carry abroad" and "extend the voice"), urgency ("urgent need"), voice ("speak to us directly"), growth ("we enrich"), and the power of language ("this word, this power"). Rukeyser asks that "the need, the scene" be carried abroad—that the need is tied to a scene, a specific environment and location, points to the interrelationship of human and environmental concerns. In other words, she uses poetry as a medium for bearing witness to environmental injustice, and instances such as these lead me to coin

the term “environmental justice witnessing” for acts of witnessing that depict injustice towards multiple species, not only humans.

In this dissertation, I argue that the poetry of Ridge, Rukeyser, Brooks, and Bishop enact forms of “environmental justice witnessing,” which I define as texts that bear witness to the experiences of the human and non-human parties involved. This designation has important implications on what forms of art should be considered examples of bearing witness; on the relationship of witnessing to the long tradition of testimonies, interviews, and other ethnographic documents associated with environmental justice research; and on the ways poetry as art, with all of the requisite aesthetic criteria met, acts as a medium for awareness and potential activism. Further, environmental justice witnessing draws integral connections between social and environmental networks and recognizes all species’ subjectivity and autonomy as worthy of witnessing. As this project involves inquiry into theories of witnessing, critical environmental justice studies, and literary criticism, my work and research are necessarily interdisciplinary.

Although some scholarly attention has been paid to the social consciousness that characterizes a number of early and mid-twentieth century poets connected to revolutionary politics, very little, if any, scholarship has articulated a coherent theory regarding poetry by women that bears witness to the intersections between social and environmental tragedies. Further, there is not a clear sense of the aesthetic and poetic practices that represent the relationship between social/cultural oppression and the human-caused environmental injustice that often accompanies it.<sup>2</sup> Brooks and Bishop have received more significant critical attention and are commonly taught in university

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<sup>2</sup> See Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Poetics* for a book length discussion of how revolutionary/political poetry of the 1930s has been discarded in the past.

level American literature survey courses; Rukeyser's work has been the subject of more scholarship in the last decade or so; and Ridge's work remains by far the most infrequently studied of the four, though recognition for her contributions, especially as an editor and promoter of poetry, continues. Of importance to my project here is the consistent attention that all four poets pay to the social, cultural, and environmental concerns of their times. Therefore, I propose that an extended study of the ways each poet writes about injustice reveals common poetic practices that signal a coherent aesthetics of witnessing that includes at its center initiating the recognition of social and environment inequity.

The arguments of this dissertation seek to enact a form of ecojustice revisionist scholarship by examining the local and global implications that witnessing has on the subjectivity of oppressed populations and environments. More specifically, I argue that poems written by twentieth-century women are instances of environmental justice witnessing that expand our conceptions of what it is to bear witness for non-human subjects. Though scholars of witnessing have not articulated theories regarding witnessing for the environment and its components, citizens with experiential involvement have long sought to provide testimony for the connections between injustice, human consumption and corruption, and the environment. Thus, this dissertation is situated among a tradition of testimonies and acts of bearing witness that illustrate environmental concerns.<sup>3</sup> Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* articulates a material feminist

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<sup>3</sup> Joni Adamson's work studying five centuries of Native American oral tradition and its relationship to the creation of and resistance to colonial oppression and Camille Dungy's work collecting poems that bear witness to African American poets and nature provide a basis for tradition of environmental testimony to which this dissertation argues these four poets belong.

reading of poetry, specifically Rukeyer's "Book of the Dead," and provides terminology with which I discuss the interrelatedness of the environment and humanity. Applying theories of witness to the transcorporeal relationship between human and non-human actors that Alaimo draws, I argue that the poetry discussed here bears witness to human abuse and simultaneously the abuse suffered by the environment. In this way, I reconceptualize what it is to bear witness to environmental justice concepts in poetry.

There are a number of shared commonalities among the poets and the poems featured in this dissertation. I have chosen to focus on Rukeyser, Brooks, and Bishop because they tether concerns of social consciousness to environmental concern but also because each poet attempts in her own way to bear witness to traumas that affect human and non-human members. Ridge's work demonstrates an earlier instance of utilizing poetic techniques to represent the environmental components of what the poet saw as a social problem. Each poet researches and/or observes the instance of injustice she depicts, and all specifically identify their positions as observers in the poems. The poems feature portraits, generally image-based, that include environmental elements as part of human description but also often focus poetic attention on portraits of the landscapes as separate entities. In addition, the poems all in some way depict movement: immigration, migration, and travel. This impacts the understanding of place, especially as human connections to environmental networks are often developed through extended interaction. These characteristics, though seemingly disparate, unite to create a form of witnessing that is ethical, socially and environmentally engaged, and visceral in its poetic effects.

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Literary scholars associated with the four poets that comprise the central figures of this dissertation have not discussed these poems as instances of witnessing nor have they connected the poems themselves to environmental justice.



In its entirety, this project seeks to both look back at the influences that led to environmental justice witnessing in the poetry that occurred in the decades of the mid-twentieth century and forward to the implications this has on contemporary poets, such as C.D. Wright whose depiction of the Civil Rights era South is written into the landscapes she describes. As such, the scope of this project necessarily extends beyond the lives of the poets featured here as their work enacts the task of any successful example of witnessing: to distribute and share the experience of trauma and injustice in order to regain subjectivity and its inherent power.

### **Theories of Witnessing**

My work begins with the foundational scholarship on witnessing that has developed out of psychoanalysis and trauma theory. Kelly Oliver's 2001 *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* is still the most comprehensive scholarship that theorizes witnessing. Theories of witnessing develop from two competing means of analyzing and articulating experiences of trauma: historiography and psychoanalytic theory. Oliver explains, "Witnessing means testifying to both something you have seen with your own eyes and something that you cannot see" (86). Thus, witnessing exists in this tension between empirical fact and knowing beyond that fact. A witness is a victim who gives testimony about a personal experience of trauma; in terms less specifically associated with trauma studies, witnesses testify to experiences that have robbed them of their subjectivity, thereby regaining the recognition of their subjectivity as well as the agency, autonomy, and identity on which that concept is based. One of the most common examples of

bearing witness in the twentieth century is art (visual, oral, and written) that represents experiences of the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup>

Artists, however, do not have to experience trauma or injustice themselves to bear witness. A secondary witness is someone who is granted the right to witness whether at the request of the experiential party or through an empathetic understanding of the trauma through research and observation. Scholarship that focuses on instances of witnessing in literature often examines the role historians, artists, and writers (primarily in the sense of non-fiction writers whose aim is to capture lived experiences) play in capturing and disseminating accounts of injustice (57). Dominick LaCapra, whose book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) focuses on how historians enact a form of bearing witness, explains the importance of maintaining ethical boundaries in instances of secondary witnessing so as not to further deprive primary witnesses of their subjectivity and “response-ability.”<sup>5</sup>

Oliver’s monograph remains the foundational text in the field of witness theory, but her work draws from as well as is expanded by a number of scholars in various fields. Shoshanna Felman, a literary scholar, and Dori Laub, a psychiatrist, “mov[e] from the literary to the visual, from the artistic to the autobiographical, and from the psychoanalytical to the historical” in their coverage of witnessing in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). LaCapra articulates theories of witness regarding historians’ accounts. Wendy Hesford, a rhetorician,

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<sup>4</sup> In poetry an oft cited example is Charles Resnikoff’s *Holocaust* (1976) in which the poet translates accounts from survivors and perpetrators into poetic form.

<sup>5</sup> “Response-ability” is Oliver’s term for the ability of person to respond to his/her traumatic or unjust experiences. See Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* for a more detailed discussion of this term and her application of it (17).

discusses Oliver's work and complicates her theories in order to discuss examples of texts that portray human rights violations in *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms* (2011). Hesford's research focuses specifically on how texts of witness gain visibility and awareness, which is particularly relevant to this dissertation as environmental concerns are often ignored due to their incremental nature.

The poet Carolyn Forché has been the driving force behind the collection and study of poems that bear witness.<sup>6</sup> Her anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* features poetry written about many of the world's most inhumane and tragic events (ranging from war to genocide to dictatorship and repression) during that century. Forché describes the necessity of establishing criteria for selection:

[The poetry of witness] often seeks to register through indirection and intervention the ways in which the linguistic and moral universes have been disrupted by events...I was forced to develop criteria for inclusion that would do justice to the poets I would necessarily have to exclude, criteria that would begin to describe the trajectory of our modernity. I decided to limit the poets in the anthology to those for whom the social had been irrevocably invaded by the political in ways that were sanctioned neither by law nor by the fictions of the social contract...they have not been afforded the legal or the physical protections that the modern state is supposed to lend its citizens, nor have they been able to enjoy the solidarity that the concept of the nation is supposed to provide. (45)

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<sup>6</sup> Forché herself acts as a secondary witness in many of the poems from her book *The Country Between Us* (1981). The poems in the book's first section "In Salvador: 1978-1980," one of the most famous of which is "The Colonel," detail experiences Forché had while working as a human rights activist in El Salvador.

Forché's description points to a number of factors directly related to environmental justice witnessing as described in this dissertation. First, she emphasizes that injustice disrupts both the "linguistic and moral universes," thereby registering the quality of witnessing that attempts to regain subjectivity through communication, visibility, and reaction. Secondly, she attributes part of the injustice to the "modern state" and "nation," pointing to the ways individual and collective identity are based on larger, official systems.

Forché's criteria, however, elides certain distinctions that prove important in understanding the nuances of witnessing. In the passage above, she describes the poets she includes as "those for whom the social had been irrevocably invaded," which indicates that the poets were the ones to suffer the invasions; she, thus, limits her articulated scope to primary witnesses, although poems in the anthology are written by primary and secondary witnesses alike. For Forché's purposes, the distinction bears little consequence as her project is to gather poems and attempt to further the general study of a poetics of witness. The differences between poetry of primary and secondary witness bears further examination, however, because secondary witnessing requires an ethical element that primary witnessing does not—having no personal claim to the injustice, the rendering of its occurrence must account for another subject position. The further theorization of the term secondary witnessing allows for a closer study of the qualities that bring about accurate and ethical witnessing by non-experiential witnesses. In keeping with current scholarship in fields such as ecocriticism and animal studies, the study of secondary witnessing allows for a greater understanding of how to ethically and accurately represent injustice and trauma that affects multiple species.

## Environmental Justice Literary Criticism

In this dissertation I extend and refine theories that have origins within the scholarship associated with environmental justice literary criticism.<sup>7</sup> In *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, which includes an analysis of the field's critical scholarship, ecocritic Lawrence Buell contends that environmental literary criticism has occurred in two general waves.<sup>8</sup> Early literary ecocriticism focused largely on nature writing and examinations of texts that feature traditional conceptions of nature at their core. Second wave ecocriticism, again broadly and imperfectly defined, seeks to count urban landscapes among the environments studied, and by so doing, invites studies of texts that pair environmental concerns with social concerns (whether tied to oppression based on race, class, sexuality, or another marker of otherness). In their "'Guest Editors' Introduction' to a 2009 issue of *MELUS* on 'Ethnicity and Ecocriticism,'" Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic reexamine which "shoulders" environmental justice critics stand on in order to recognize "ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries" (6). The work Adamson and Slovic along with a number of other environmental justice scholars are engaged with is what Buell calls "ecojustice revisionism" (119).

Much recent research in the environmental humanities focuses on the systemic and transnational issues related to migration, borders and boundaries, and on what

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<sup>7</sup> Pioneers in this segment of environmental criticism include scholars Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, Scott Slovic, and Rachel Stein, among others.

<sup>8</sup> "Waves" is an inadequate but widely used term in many fields, not just environmental literary criticism. Buell suggests palimpsest and all the layers such a metaphor provides as a substitute. Though he addresses the difficulty of assigning any term to the categorization of such a fluid and diverse field, he does ultimately use "wave" in his discussion as it has become the standard term (Buell 17). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari use rhizomatic root systems in order to illustrate the interconnectedness of various branches in creation and interpretation across time (19).

ecocritic Stacy Alaimo terms transcorporeality, the transfer of elements, especially toxins, between human and environmental bodies (2-4). Ecojustice revisionist scholarship often aims to complicate the dynamics between dominant and minority populations (based on race, class, religious belief, gender, sexuality, or nationality) in light of criticism regarding what was seen as reductive treatment by early ecocritics of “environmental racism” (Buell 115). Benjamin Chavis, the executive director of the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice in 1987, first defined environmental racism as

racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of people of color communities for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and history of excluding people of color from leadership in the environmental movement. (qtd. in Adamson 76)

While this definition speaks to both the allocation of environmental resources as well as the practices within the environmental movement that involve racist attitudes, it articulates the conception of environmental oppression based primarily on race. Ecojustice revisionist scholars study these unjust situations based on numerous markers of minority status or otherness. Thus, current research in environmental justice literary scholarship focuses on examining texts that represent instances of more broadly defined environmental racism as well as engaging varied voices in environmental discussions in order to gain visibility, awareness, and engagement with the local and global issues that these texts depict.

Environmental justice literary criticism examines a long tradition of populations witnessing in various forms to their experiences of environmental injustice; that is, environmental scholars have often looked to the people themselves to tell their stories of environmental hardship, exclusion, abuse, and injustice. Adamson's monograph *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (2001) includes analysis of texts by indigenous authors and the ways in which those authors represent culture, environment, power, nationhood, and justice. Adamson examines contemporary texts but traces indigenous cultures' accounts of environmental injustice back to the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, for example: "[T]hese writers reach back more than five hundred years to show us that nature has a history and that some constructs of nature are detrimental to human communities, primarily those of the poor and marginalized" (*American Indian* 29). Marginalized populations have a long tradition of creating stories, art, and other artifacts that relate their environmental histories and the injustices those histories include. One example given by both Adamson and Forché is the instance of the *testimonio* in Latin American literature. Testimonios occur when people of oppressed populations bear witness to political injustices, often in stories (Adamson 148; Forché 36). *The Environmental Justice Reader* (2002), edited by Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, includes interviews with artists engaged in environmental art, defined by Giovanna Di Chiro as "art situated in urban spaces and produced by marginalized communities," that in visual form allows for primary witnesses to testify to events in urban landscapes.

For many of the poets featured in this dissertation but especially those poems that feature urban landscapes, environmental trauma, abuse, or neglect occurs incrementally

and is often felt most keenly in aggregate. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon coins the term “slow violence” for instances of environmental abuse that go unnoticed and happen slowly over time:

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.

Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into sensational visibility. (2)

At stake for Nixon are examples of violence enacted against oppressed people (here the poor of the global south) by more powerful groups (e.g., the industrialized global north). He cites numerous examples, among them “American nuclear colonialism in the Pacific” (33), landmines and cluster bombs remaining in Iraq and Afghanistan in the aftermath of wars (199), and ecotourism in South Africa that focuses on selling “wild Africa” and its megafauna (175). In each case, the violence only becomes noticeable over time and even then, due to the oppressive power structures in place, lacks visibility. Thus, in a broader sense, Nixon argues that the definition of violence should be expanded in what he articulates as two complimentary ways: based on time and visibility. Violence that occurs over time is typically not recognized as violence, often because the attritional violence is difficult to identify and articulate, and therefore goes unopposed. Nixon names these events as violence in order to classify them as abuse and establish markers for their identification.



I rely heavily on the work of ecojustice critics who not only redefine what constitutes environmental injustice but also propose that solutions to environmental injustice rest in community awareness and involvement. I use “community” here as a broad term including both the people who reside in a specific place but also the larger communities that often unknowingly interact with environments that they do not consider their own.<sup>9</sup> Current scholars argue that gaining community attention and concern often rests in the hands of “writer-activists,” people who ostensibly act as secondary witnesses by documenting environmental injustice.<sup>10</sup> I contend that “writer-activists” are representative of a larger collective of artists and thinkers who witness to environmental concerns in their mediums of choice—the key, however, is conceiving of art as a medium for the dissemination of cultural, social, and environmental injustices.

### **Women and Environment**

Bearing witness is in itself a genderless act—in fact, part of the argument in this dissertation centers on the fact that witnessing is not only genderless but also species-less, that poems can witness to both human and non-human trauma. Though no single gender is or should be associated with the act of witnessing, women poets in the early to mid-twentieth century were particularly interested in social commentary.<sup>11</sup> The burgeoning women’s movements of the day, of particular note is women’s suffrage, meant that women were beginning to make their voices heard in regards to the causes they cared

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<sup>9</sup> For example, waste in streams and river often affect communities downstream from the origin of the contamination.

<sup>10</sup> I draw the term “writer-activist” from Rob Nixon’s work.

<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that men don’t write about social issues—of course they do and in a myriad of ways during the early twentieth century. Political poetry (whether regarding social, cultural, or national concerns) written by men, however, has a long tradition in America.

about.<sup>12</sup> This newly found power of opinion translated into an awareness of local injustices; often oppressed and mistreated themselves, women were perhaps more likely to be sensitive to the injustices around them. Though women's voices were gaining a wider audience, this expansion far outpaced the means of critique, even an overall positive reception often included the appraisal of femininity. The poets featured in this dissertation challenged conceptions of what constituted a female poetics and what forms writing by women could and should include.

Undeniably important to my research here is the role gender plays in the reception and later study of these socially and environmentally engaged texts by women poets, then as now. For example, though Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry is widely taught in college classrooms, her work is reduced to a few representative poems, valuable and impressive though they may be, and connected very closely to studies of race, in particular the Black Arts Movement as part of the Civil Right era. Examining race alongside gender, environment, and social, cultural, and political concerns also reveals a particular poetic project among engaged women poets: to use poetry as a form of witnessing that brings publicity to their concerns but also as a form capable of restoring the subjectivity of oppressed and marginalized people and landscapes. Here I define "subjectivity," following Oliver, as "possessing the ability to respond to ones experiences" ("responsibility") (17). The projects these women poets create therefore deal with multiple markers of marginality, one of which is a feminist engagement in social and environmental dealings.

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<sup>12</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which granted women the right to vote, was passed by Congress in 1919 and ratified in 1920.

In *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (2012) historian Nancy Unger argues that in the United States women have held more powerful positions in conservation campaigns and other environmentally concerned movements based partially on a tradition that associates the natural world with the female sphere. Further, arguments made for women's involvement in environmental issues were made based on feminine virtues. In the chapter most appropriate to this dissertation, Unger argues that from the 1920s to the 1940s women gained access to conversations about conservationism, the National Park System, and outdoor camps by couching their ideas as extensions of the domestic space: "As long as women limited their activism to gender-appropriate topics, such as educating children, planting trees, and cultivating gardens, they merited the approval of influential men" (105). This account explores the ways that women in history have successfully had their voices heard regarding environmental concerns. The poets in this dissertation, however, frequently challenge the often unfair range of expression and interest assigned to women during their eras; this has contributed at certain times to work being forgotten, narrowly studied, or seen as uncharacteristic for an artistic period.

Environmental criticism includes numerous articles and books that focus on the role gender and sexuality play in understanding women's relationships to the environment. The essays in Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman's *Material Feminisms* (2008) address "the co-constitutive materiality of human corporeality and nonhuman natures" through "scientific/economic/political/ethical analyses" (9). Material feminism thus connects humans to environments, paying particular attention to the affects the understandings of these relationships have on women and women's bodies. Catriona

Mortimer-Sandilands' *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (1999) is important to this project in its focus on the humanities' role in achieving and maintaining democracy but also for her discussion of women's relationship to environment, democracy, and activism. Further, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010), a collection Sandilands edited with Bruce Erickson, makes arguments for the study of sexuality in terms of environmental politics. Giovanna Di Chiro's work details the intersections between social and environmental justice and argues for more tangible and public means of bringing about recognition for environmental injustice. These ecocritics have set an impressive precedent for developing arguments that effectively unite concerns for justice, equality, visibility, memory, healing, democracy, and literature.

### **Modernism and Engaged Poetics**

Surrounding the poetics discussed in this dissertation are questions about the usefulness and accuracy of strict periodization: describing any of these poets merely as "modernists" neglects aesthetic and cultural distinctions that characterize different portions of the modernist period. Alternatively, the patterns and similarities shared by the literature produced in a specific time period do seem fruitful ways to establish trends that comprise a literary heritage. With the limitations of any form of periodization in mind, I argue that the poets in this dissertation write very specifically about the cultural, political, and social climates of their days, and they adopt, alter, and perpetuate a poetics that is engaged in contemporary aesthetic debates. Thus, studying these poems as representative of environmental justice witnessing illustrates important historically located cultural

values and concerns that help further understand the literary inheritance of today's writers.

This dissertation takes as its subject four American women poets researching, creating and writing from the early twentieth century onward to the 1970s, a wide swath of American literature. Ridge's poetry is often classified as early/high modernist. Rukeyser, Brooks, and Bishop are considered late modernists.<sup>13</sup> The narrowing that the label "late modernism" implies is minimal, merely indicating a progression from the initial development of modernism associated with T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and their contemporaries. Culturally, early modernists reacted to turn of the century concerns such as industrialization, urbanization, and World War I. Late modernists typically depict cultural events after the Great Depression including World War II and later the Civil Rights era. As the category of late modernism covers a broad and varied body of work, much of the poetry in America written from the 1930s onwards is either studied independently or further divided into waves, schools, or movements. Rather than engage in continued study of these poets in that way, I provide an examination of and develop a name for the type of writing, "environmental justice witnessing," that takes place across genres and time periods. By viewing these poets as environmental justice witnesses, I differentiate their projects from others occurring in the late modernist era, further refining the interests, aesthetics, and positioning associated with modernism in the mid-decades of the twentieth century.

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<sup>13</sup> In *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, Arts Between World Wars*, Tyrus Miller argues for a further examination of the fiction written in the period between the wars, roughly the 1920s and 30s. For fiction, he attempts to theorize the period between high modernism and postmodernism. Poetry, however, does not adhere to the same aesthetic shifts, and many scholars, among them Lynn Keller, and by extension, Marjorie Perloff, argue that late modernism in poetry still continues to contemporary poets as we lack a better, more accurate term for the writing that is still in many ways tied to the modernist aesthetic enacted after WWI.

Many of these poets, especially Rukeyser, have been studied previously as socially concerned, political poets. For example, Cary Nelson's *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (2003) is an attempt at finding coherence among the varied work of the 1930s, more specifically recovering the ignored, lost, or unstudied political poetry of this era.<sup>14</sup> Nelson writes, "In moments of particular crisis or public inspiration progressive poets wrote as part of a collective enterprise. For some years the very need to differentiate has blocked us from either theorizing or describing the poetry's collective power" (7). Nelson's argument, though compelling and important, also limits the scope of these poets' projects to the social causes with which they align themselves and assigns their collective power to poetry as political revolution. I contend here that though the social concerns depicted remain deeply resonant today and though in many instances these poets did set out to document what they saw solely as social tragedies or problems, their work extends beyond political poetry in aim and beyond the human element in its concern. Each of these poets in her own ways attempts to witness for human suffering or loss, but all four see the human trauma as inextricably linked to some form of environmental injustice. Because of the interactions between humanity and the environment on micro (cellular, i.e. the silicon filled lungs of the miners in Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead") and macro (the aftermath of the Great Migration depicted in Brooks' "In the Mecca") levels, these modernist poets develop a type of poetry bound to scientific, historical, sociological, political, and aesthetic events. To ignore the rich traditions to which these poets align their poetry in order to categorize

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<sup>14</sup> See also John Lowney, *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry, 1935-1968* for discussions of political poetry during this era.

their experimentation as entirely political denies the vastness of their poetic projects—individually and collectively the power of the work discussed in the chapters to follow is largely its belief in what poetry can and should do; thus, the late modernist poetry that enacts environmental justice witnessing is rooted in poetics and politics, of course, but also culture, landscapes, society, and history.

In pairing poetics with theories of witnessing and environmental justice criticism, I examine the ways poetry offers a unique medium for eliciting physical, mental, and emotional reactions to environmental injustice. While ecojustice literary critics often study poetry and poets that feature studies of the environment, this dissertation draws from both ecocriticism and poetics to argue that the aesthetics associated with mid-century American women poets convey instances of injustice to an audience not specifically associated with activism, social or environmental, while also achieving artistic innovation. Further, establishing the work of poets as texts that bear witness expands definitions of subjectivity, in that the environment is a subject that suffers, and of secondary witnessing, in that citizens can act as secondary witnesses for the trauma of the environment. Alternatively, connecting environmental criticism's interest in traditions, both oral and written, that testify to the treatment and mistreatment of the environment provides a theoretical set of terms with which to understand how these types of witnessing function theoretically. That these women wrote in response to what they saw primarily as social issues with environmentally engaged images and motifs speaks to a form of witnessing that has not been clearly articulated by literary scholars, environmental critics, or theorists of witnessing.

## **Chapter 1: “Hester street, Like a forlorn woman over-born”: Social Activism and Environmental Awareness in Lola Ridge’s “The Ghetto”**

As a precursor to the mid-century women poets featured in this dissertation, Lola Ridge is an example of a poet from the early decades of the twentieth century whose political engagement led her to depict the unjust living and working conditions that immigrants suffered under in urban locations. Ridge’s “The Ghetto” (1918) takes as its subject the Jewish ghetto on the Lower East Side of New York City in the first two decades of the twentieth century. *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, as well as a large portion of her other poetry, engaged with newsworthy political and social events of her time. Scholarly attention towards Ridge has overlooked her poetry in preference for the study of her influence as an editor of important literary magazines and as an active literary figure during her era. Though Ridge’s political leanings and her aesthetic tastes are readily apparent in her actions and her editorial selections, Ridge’s poetry should not be ignored as a means of examining the ways she herself attempts to capture socio-political concerns poetically.

In this chapter, I argue that in attempting to depict the situation of the Jewish population living in the ghetto of the Lower East Side, Ridge cannot separate concern for the people from the environment in which they reside. In “The Ghetto” the oppression of the people results from environmental systems that isolate and dehumanize the immigrant population. Ridge’s long poem is an example of early modernist Imagism, but a version of Imagism that expands the bounds of what and how poetry represents lived experiences. Ridge illustrates the importance of examining the local, of focusing on specific images that stand in for large and weighty social and cultural issues, and of utilizing traditional poetic devices, such as similes, in order to construct poetry particularly modernist, urban,



and socially engaged. To this end, Ridge repeatedly uses similes in order to connect human and non-human participants as well as urban and rural landscapes in the network of the ghetto. Further, Ridge's similes also illustrate that unsafe environments, whether in the country or the city, breed unfair social and political situations.

## **Chapter 2: “One country marked by error and air”: Environmental Justice Witnessing in Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead”**

Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" (1938) is a sequence of poems depicting the injustice of a mining tragedy that occurred in West Virginia in the late 1920's.<sup>15</sup> In this chapter, I argue that Rukeyser is acting as a secondary witness for the trauma of the miners and their families, but further that through her use of a documentary collage technique, she also expands the definition of witnessing to include giving testimony about and for the environment. By applying the concept of "environmental justice witnessing," I reveal that it is not only the human tragedy that compels "The Book of the Dead" but also the systemic failures that result in both immediate and attritional instances of social and environmental injustice. I aim to not only establish Rukeyser as a poet whose reach extends beyond what scholars have described as leftist political poetry, but also to expand the scope of environmental justice criticism to include a study of poetics.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This tragedy occurred when the Hawk's Nest Tunnel was built near Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. Plans for the tunnel were drawn in 1927 and construction continued into the early 1930's. The first lawsuits were filed for workers suffering from silicosis in 1932. Rukeyser visited the tunnel site in 1936 and interviewed victims and their families (Gander).

<sup>16</sup> See Kadlec; Thurston for discussions of Rukeyser's poetry as politically leftist verse. See Goodman for a discussion regarding the classification of Rukeyser's aesthetic project.

I work from and expand upon previous scholarship by examining the ways in which Rukeyser acts as a secondary witness to the injustices that affected the people and environment associated with the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Tragedy. The environmental criticism most central to my argument is the work of material feminist Stacy Alaimo. In her book *Bodily Natures*, Alaimo defines the term "transcorporeality" to describe the interrelatedness she identifies in the relationship between the "human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors" (2). Alaimo uses Rukeyser's descriptions of the x-rays and maps in "The Book of the Dead" to demonstrate the transference between human and environmental bodies. Alaimo writes, "Even as Rukeyser includes a panoply of discourse, she struggles to map an ontology in which the body of the work, the river, the silica, the 'natural,' and the industrial environment are simultaneously material and social. . . . Specifically, Rukeyser presents what I call a transcorporeal landscape" (48). In order to develop a further understanding of Rukeyser's role as a poet in her depiction of this transcorporeal landscape, I trace the poetic techniques Rukeyser utilizes in order to elevate the damage caused to the environment as equal to and interrelated with the miners' disease. What I term "poetic transference" occurs in "The Book of the Dead" when environmental elements are made parallel to human elements in image, sound, or body. Thus, examining Rukeyser's poem for its depiction of transcorporeality reveals that poetic transference is the means by which non-human entities receive attention in Rukeyser's version of environmental justice witnessing.

### **Chapter 3: “In the midst of hells and gruel”: The Slow Violence of Environmental Exclusion and Internal Racism in Gwendolyn Brooks’ “In the Mecca”**

Gwendolyn Brooks’ “In the Mecca” (1968) is the first poem published after the poet participates in a conference at Fisk University in 1967 where she becomes involved in the Black Arts Movement. The poem follows Mrs. Sallie Smith, an African American mother, home to her kitchenette apartment in the historically based Mecca Building. The main incident of the poem centers on the loss of Pepita, Mrs. Sallie’s youngest daughter, and the family’s search through the tenement building for her. Near the end of the poem, the narrator reveals that Pepita’s murdered body is found under the cot belonging to another Mecca resident. The images throughout “In the Mecca” point to instances of slow violence (accretive, gradual environmental injustices) as being in a causal relationship with broken community structures, internalized racism, and the perpetration of immediate violence.

Brooks sets this long poem in the Mecca Building in order to gain recognition of the abuses, both social and environmental, inflicted upon the real people and places of the South Side of Chicago. Historically based, “In the Mecca” confronts the systemized injustice of segregation by describing a building that was once luxury housing for wealthy whites as deteriorating and dangerous. I argue that Brooks engages in a type of environmental justice witnessing that is particularly invested in time and exclusion as forms of injustice. The Great Migration brings large numbers of African Americans from the rural South to urban areas, and as these populations flock to cities like Chicago, they are segregated into areas no longer safe, clean, or healthy enough for their former white populations. Thus, the residents of the Mecca who Brooks depicts are not only struggling to establish relationships to a new place but that place has been abandoned by a previous

population and is already in a state of decay when they inherit it. Brooks illustrates that the lack of adequate landscapes, the exclusion from better landscapes, and the inability to affect change in perpetually deteriorating landscapes contributes significantly to internalized racism. Poetically, Brooks represents these concepts through positioning the narrator as an empathetic, observant witness; creating portraits of the building along with portraits of the residents; and including both instances of immediate and slow violence.

#### **Chapter 4: “Remembering it all wrong”: Ecotourism, Memory, and Environmental Justice in Elizabeth Bishop’s Brazil Poems**

In this chapter, I focus on the poems that Elizabeth Bishop wrote about Brazil, a country she lived in for close to fifteen years, in *Questions of Travel* (1965) and *New Poems* (1979). The poems “Arrival at Santos,” “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” “Questions of Travel,” “Santarém,” and “Pink Dog” each feature aspects of Brazilian culture and landscape, but Bishop carefully identifies her subject position as an outside observer in order to avoid disseminating her verse as authentically Brazilian. That is, Bishop’s poetry demonstrates a concern for the effects of what I term “artificial landscapes,” understandings of places derived from representations, often replete with ulterior motives, of foreign people, cultures, and locations. Bishop’s poems about Brazil point to the inability of tourists to act as witnesses to foreign cultures and environments without possessing empathy and the opportunity for close observation.

Bishop uses form, parenthetical interruption, and the denial of epiphany to render her position as an observer, and this careful positioning aligns her poetry with secondary witnessing, which depends on empathy and observation for an ethical basis. In “January 1, 1502” Bishop creates parallels between the Spanish conquistadors’ colonization of

Brazil and tourists' and artists' impositions on the culture in their renderings of people and place; in this way, Bishop's poem registers a concern for the role representation plays in capturing and altering indigenous cultures and landscapes. By pairing "Arrival at Santos" and "Santarém," which were published nearly fifteen years apart, I demonstrate that Bishop's poetics of environmental justice witnessing in a foreign place develop alongside her relationship to that location. I argue that in "Pink Dog" Bishop questions the tourism industry's role in transforming and commercializing Brazilian culture with negative consequences for the safety and well-being of the country's residents, both human and non-human.

#### **Coda: "There is a sanctuary in the mind": Environmental Justice Witnesses in 21st Century Poetry**

The coda discusses contemporary poet C.D. Wright and the way in which her book-length poem *One With Others* (2010) engages in a form of environmental justice witnessing that is informed by the poetic inheritance bequeathed by the four poets featured in this dissertation. Unlike Ridge, Rukeyser, Brooks, and Bishop who depict social injustices during or soon after their occurrences, Wright engages in environmental justice witnessing for events that occurred decades before. Because of this distinction, Wright's poem illustrates the long-term consequences of the activism practiced by engaged citizens in recent historical past. Thus, whereas the endings to the earlier poems reflect plans or theories for sustainable futures, Wright's work examines the legacies of those plans, especially how the environment retains scars from previous injustices.

## CHAPTER 1

### "HESTER STREET, LIKE A FORLORN WOMAN OVER-BORN": SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN LOLA RIDGE'S "THE GHETTO"

“Will you feast with me, American People?  
But what have I that shall seem good to you!  
On my board are bitter apples  
And honey served on thorns,  
And in my flagons fluid iron,  
Hot from the crucibles.  
How should such fare entice you!”  
—epigraph to *The Ghetto and Other Poems*

“In 1918 Ridge published her first volume of poems, *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, which electrified reviewers and readers with its free-verse snapshots of the city, its easy command of the style popularized by Sandburg and strongly identified with ‘tough’ masculinity and gritty realism.”

—William Drake, *The First Wave*

#### **Introduction**

On August 22, 1927, the poet and literary editor Lola Ridge was arrested for her part in a protest outside the Charlestown prison in Massachusetts where Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were being held the night before the two Italians were executed for a robbery that they in all likelihood did not commit (Berke, *Women* 54). The names Sacco and Vanzetti are still recognizable today: less for their fame in the twenties as anarchists and more for what is thought to be a miscarriage of justice that led to their wrongful executions.<sup>17</sup> Ridge, not unlike other poets of the period with leftist leanings, often participated in protests and was known as a political activist; unlike many of her

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<sup>17</sup> See G. Louis Joughin and Edmund Morgan, *The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti* for details about the history and injustice of the Sacco and Vanzetti trial and execution.

contemporaries, however, she translated her activist participation into a poetics of protest and resistance.<sup>18</sup> In the case of the Sacco and Vanzetti trial and execution, Ridge wrote a number of poems, most notably “Two in the Death House” and “Three Men Die,” that contain her reactions to the specific injustices surrounding the treatment of the Italian anarchists and the general “atmosphere of postwar conservatism and xenophobia” that eventually led to their executions (Berke, *Women* 52). Very much a poet of her day, this instance was not the only time Ridge would respond in poetry to the social injustice she observed and protested; in fact, many of Ridge’s poems deal very directly with major injustices of the early twentieth century and become important ways of protesting unsafe labor practices, racial bigotry, government corruption, and the environments in which these injustices are housed.<sup>19</sup>

Nearly ten years prior to the Sacco and Vanzetti protest, Ridge published *The Ghetto and Other Poems* (1918), which features a number of resistance poems.<sup>20</sup> The title poem “The Ghetto,” though not about a specific instance of injustice, centers on a state of perpetual inequality in a lengthy nine sections, detailing the living and working conditions of Jewish residents in New York City’s Lower East Side. The poet inserts herself in three sections of the poem (sections two, five, and nine), and in this way draws

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<sup>18</sup> In the case of the Sacco and Vanzetti protest, poets Edna St. Vincent Millay and Katherine Anne Porter were also present. See Porter, *The Never Ending Wrong* for a description of Ridge’s actions as Boston police attempted to disband the protestors.

<sup>19</sup> See Cary Nelson; Nancy Berke. Of specific note are Ridge’s poems “Lullaby,” which chillingly immortalizes an incident in St. Louis, Missouri in 1917 when white women threw a living African-American infant into a fire, and “Stone Face,” a poem questioning the treatment of “radical labor leader” Tom Mooney (Berke, *Women* 60).

<sup>20</sup> Portions of the book were first published in *New Republic* earlier that year; the two most famous resistance poems are “Lullaby” and “Frank Little at Calvary.” For a brief summary of “Lullaby” see previous footnote. “Frank Little at Calvary” memorializes the lynching of Frank Little, an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World, by hired killers for the Anaconda Copper Company. See the Industrial Workers of the World website for a more detailed discussion of Little’s life.

from her own experiences renting a room and living in tenement housing on the Lower East Side to emphasize the subject position of an immigrant.<sup>21</sup> The use of the first person also helps to delineate her perspective from the Jewish immigrants about whom she writes. The environment of the ghetto is not only a backdrop to the hardships the residents face; the decaying urban landscape figures largely in the type of oppression they must confront as well as limiting their access to better, healthier, more “American” environments.

Ridge approaches the injustice from its social manifestations (e.g., unfair labor practices, unsafe housing, and lack of representation for immigrant populations), but she consistently describes the urban environment, often comparing elements of the city to images from country living, as containing complicated, interconnected elements akin to the systems that occur in rural environments. In “The Ghetto” Ridge most often describes the environment as urban and oppressive, but sections of it as well as other poems from *The Ghetto and Other Poems* (e.g. “The Star,” “Dispossessed,” and “North Wind”) are filled with alternatively beautiful yet distressing images of the natural world. Ridge thus equates environmental decay, whether urban or rural, as a significant and often ignored form of oppression. Due to this, she anticipates two elements that later environmental scholars will theorize: (1) urban environments are worthy of the same study as natural environments as both operate as systems in which humans, as well as other species, interact; and (2) social and environmental injustice cannot be separated from one another, as social injustice is often inflicted through environmental means. Ridge cannot divorce the chaotic, unhealthy, and decaying urban environment from the poor social treatment

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<sup>21</sup> Ridge was doubly an immigrant, born in Ireland and grew up in New Zealand, and she immigrates to the US in 1907.



suffered by this population of Jewish immigrants, and she uses poetry as the means of creating awareness as well as a means of critique.

In this chapter, I argue that in the long poem “The Ghetto” Ridge acts as a secondary witness to the environmental racism that takes place on the Lower East Side just after the turn of the century. With urban transportation systems in Manhattan (most notably, elevated trains and the subway) in stages of development and not yet functional, the contrast between life in the ghetto and life elsewhere in New York City is stark. I contend that Ridge constructs the environment of the Jewish ghetto as a network separate from the network of New York City, separate, too, from the network that comprises America. I use the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of a network as “any netlike or complex system or collection of interrelated things” in order to conceive of the ways the landscape of the ghetto (the chaotic streets, the run-down, crowded buildings, and the filthy and polluting factories) acts as an environmental network complete with a set of physical features as well as cultural “signposts” that correspond to the knowledge and experiences of the resident immigrant population. Thus, Ridge documents the consequences of the oppressive environment on the ability of immigrants to establish healthy, productive networks both inside and outside their community. Environmental racism, derived from Benjamin Chavez’s definition, is the unfair and disproportionate access, or lack thereof, to desirable environmental elements, i.e. clean and safe water, land, and air, based on race and other markers of difference.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For a definition and historical account of environmental racism, see Joni Adamson’s *American Indian Literature*. Chavis defines environmental racism as “the deliberate targeting of minority communities for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of life-threatening poisons and pollutants in those communities, and the exclusion of people of color from leadership in the environmental movement” (76). Environmental racism was initially conceived of based on race, but the definition was expanded by

Ridge's aesthetic choices reflect many modernist tendencies, but in her pursuit of social justice and the visibility that is central to righting socio-political wrongs, she expands and complicates modernist poetics. "The Ghetto" is Imagist in nature: a series of images without direct commentary or extended lyric interludes to explain or contemplate those images. Ridge's Imagism, however, is based on close observation of contemporary injustices, which fits with William Carlos Williams' dictate to represent the "local." Ridge differs, however, by consistently calling attention to a local landscape to which she only tangentially belongs and one which she finds operating under unfair, dangerous practices. Poetically speaking, Ridge deviates from Imagist forms by including ubiquitous similes, which the Imagists delete in favor of colons or line breaks that perhaps indicate equality but do not demand it. Thus, Ridge challenges the bounds of Imagism in order to draw attention to the poetic construction as well as the connections between urban and rural environments. The similes Ridge chooses are largely related to decay in the natural world—in which an element of the ghetto is described as similar to the natural environment—thus, something that in nature is understood as decayed, dying, and unhealthy is equivalent to something in an urban setting. In rural situations a lack of clean water, air, and land is obviously problematic, but Ridge is one of the first urban modernists to recognize that broken, decaying environmental systems in the urban setting are central to understanding problems related to the social injustice she sees occurring there. Ridge draws attention to the ways environmental injustice is associated with structural violence in New York City by consistently pairing urban and rural images in similes; in this way, she addresses the social and environmental networks to which

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ecojustice revisionist scholars to focus on class, gender, sexuality, level of industrialization, and other markers of minority status (Adamson, *American Indian Literature* 76-77).

immigrants have access, often broken or deteriorating, and those to which they are repeatedly denied access.

The clear intention of many of Ridge's poems is to draw attention to social issues; as an anarchist, Ridge's leftist sentiments mean that she is most often categorized as a political poet or a poet of resistance. Nancy Berke, the most recent scholar to focus on Ridge, calls Ridge "a political poet...[with] immense passion and skill" (Berke, *Women* 49). Cary Nelson, a modernist scholar whose work mainly focuses on the recovery of poets with political or revolutionary agendas, refers to Ridge as a writer "in empathy with specific immigrant populations in the cities" (*Repression* 87-88). Both make claims to discussing Ridge's poetics as a segment of early modernism, the segment of American poetry which is characterized by reactions to the Industrial Revolution, explosive thinking (Nietzsche, Freud, Darwin, and so on), and World War I. Cary Nelson challenges common perceptions of modernism: "In the so-called imagist period in modern American poetry, we also see populist poems celebrating American life, a restrained and universalizing regionalism, radical experiments with verbal collage, and poems on the bankruptcy of American culture." The basic premise of both Nelson's *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* and his later *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* is that political or protest poetry during this period, and many other periods, is often neglected because poetry critics have traditionally assumed that 'the poetic' is maintained in part by the repetition of the long standing general insistence that poetry has no relation to the 'popular'" (*Repression* 67). As Nelson indicates, this obviously flawed binary where experimental (and therefore "poetic") verse cannot include populist sentiment

results in the fact that populist poetry of the early twentieth century has not generally been taught or studied consistently.

Ridge played two major roles in the practice and dissemination of the poetic aesthetic and American viewpoint in the early decades of the twentieth century: editor and poet. Ridge acted as an editor for a few little magazines, one of the most notable of which was *Broom*, a magazine for international arts. Ridge, as the American editor for a brief period, believed in furthering an American aesthetic that in many ways was opposed to the *avant garde* writing being produced abroad: “She supported the development of a uniquely American aesthetic, whereas [Harold] Loeb [the publisher of the *Broom*] and his European associates favored the experimental art they encountered in Europe. Ridge was far from sanguine about continental, particularly French, influence on American art” (Berke, *Women* 51-52). In conflict here are the modernists’ attitudes towards what poetry should and can do. Though, Ridge would not have assumed all American poetry should be activist in nature (and to be sure some of her poetry is not meant to incite protest, resistance, or even awareness), Ridge felt the American aesthetic should be deeply embedded in the whole array of people who made up the country.

Ridge’s own work as a poet is marked by her status as an American immigrant as well as the fact she is characterized as “one of the great militant saints” in her pursuit of justice for oppressed and underprivileged populations (Drake 185). In *Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker*, the only extended piece of criticism written on Ridge in the last ten years, Berke writes, “[Ridge] wants to reach outward rather than delve inward to explore a complicated social world that impinges upon her own poetic spirit—her ‘deeps.’ Although one should not attribute a singular

meaning to the poetic unconscious, Ridge's poetry is best understood within a social context" (*Women* 33). One of the elements that distinguishes "The Ghetto" from other poems of the period is Ridge's description of the Jewish population in New York City; both elements, the immigrants and the city, are of equal importance in understanding the brand of modernism that Ridge introduces, one predicated on the awareness of social injustice.<sup>23</sup> Cristanne Miller's "Tongues 'loosened in the melting pot': The Poets of *Others* and the Lower East Side" from *Modernism/modernity* in 2007 features a discussion of the literary scene that many writers of the period, among them Ridge and Mina Loy, felt reflected the immigrant culture of New York City. For Miller, Jewish immigrants in New York established a particular way of life and therefore the poets of the era created a type of modernist writing that reflected the nature of immigrant culture in the US:

...unlike Jewish immigrants to Paris, Zurich, Berlin, and other European cities, who were often transient in their living patterns, and unlike many Italian immigrants, who crossed the Atlantic to work but sent their money home and intended to return to Italy, Central and Eastern European, Jews came to the U.S. with the intention to settle. This transformative moment in American demographics coincided with the moment of aesthetic transformation in modern literature in ways appealing to the imagination of some New York poets—and perhaps especially to female poets, who

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<sup>23</sup> While other poets of the era, especially female poets, engaged with urban environments, their poetry does not take social action as its aim nor do they engage in the injustices of the urban landscape in tangible ways. Whereas Edna St. Vincent Millay, Katharine Anne Porter, and other literary figures of the day protested alongside Ridge and poets like Marianne Moore wrote poetry about the viciousness as well as opportunity in New York City, Ridge used poetry as the avenue to unite the two.

experienced an excitement about the professional opportunities offered by the century and the city similar to that of many immigrants. For them, “the Jew” of common experience was not a wanderer but a neighbor, both absorbing and transforming the experience of living in America. (456-7)

Immigration, women, and modern aesthetics all “coincided” at this moment, and they do so in a specific time and place: the city. Miller describes the Jewish immigrant as a neighbor as opposed to a wanderer to emphasize belonging. In “The Ghetto” Ridge clearly establishes her position as a neighbor to Jewish immigrants, not a Jewish immigrant herself; in this way, she acts as an observer rather than a first-hand participant.<sup>24</sup> Also inherent in describing the position of Jewish immigrants, however, is the logic that to be neighbors is to be part of a neighborhood or network. The ghetto, physically separate and differentiated from other parts of the city, houses a population that is at once part of America but also separated from it, especially in terms of living standards. Ridge recognizes that neighbors may or may not suffer the same injustices as each other and that the denial of access to the larger network of New York City can have crippling effects on whole populations. In order to bring about recognition, Ridge seeks writing that exposes different versions of American life.

### **Recovering Lola Ridge: Politics, Poetry, and Visibility**

Scholars and poets both seem confounded by the inconsistent visibility of Ridge’s work. In 2011, for example, poet Robert Pinsky’s article in *Slate* is titled “Street Poet:

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<sup>24</sup> In this way, I mean to indicate a difference between Ridge’s project and the writing of Jewish immigrants themselves. For example, Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* is a novel about a young Jewish immigrant and her Jewish household in New York City; written by a Jewish immigrant, the subject position of the writer and main character differ from the subject position Ridge establishes in “The Ghetto.”

How the often-overlooked Lola Ridge became one of America's first great urban Modernists." The title alone tells a great deal about Ridge's position today: overlooked but still considered great. Although Ridge's poetry met with a largely warm reception during her era, her work has been neglected by scholars, arguably because larger figures loomed during this period or perhaps because Ridge's body of work is relatively small.<sup>25</sup> Those scholars who have studied Ridge, most notably Nancy Berke and William Drake respectively, note their surprise that renewed interest in her poetry has not been sparked, especially by feminist scholars.<sup>26</sup> It seems, too, that because of the kairotic nature of many of Ridge's poems, her work has not received continuing attention.<sup>27</sup> Alarming, then, contemporary readers have lost touch with the cultural and societal markers to which Ridge refers if we fail to adequately study her work and the ways it reflects our

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<sup>25</sup>Larger figures of the era include T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In terms of women writers, Marianne Moore and Mina Loy receive much more critical attention today than Ridge. As mentioned previously, Cary Nelson's research centers on what he calls "revolutionary poetics," and he attributes Ridge being "lost" to the political nature of her poetry.

In his review of *The Ghetto and Other Poems* for *The New York Post* in 1919, Louis Untermeyer writes, "Elsewhere the same dignity is maintained, though with less magic. Miss Ridge sometimes falls into the error of over-capitalizing her metaphors and the use of 'like' as a conjunction. The other poems echo, if they do not always attain, the fresh beauty of 'The Ghetto.'" In *A History of Modern Poetry* (1976), David Perkins writes, "The dedication and selflessness of Miss Ridge greatly impressed those who knew her, and her influence as a person may have been greater than that of her poetry" (362).

Oddly enough for a poet all but forgotten by scholars let alone the average poetry reader, a quote from Lola Ridge appears on Oprah Winfrey's website under the category "Quotes That Give You Hope": "You are full of unshaped dreams.../ You are laden with beginnings.../There is hope in you." Though not necessarily representative of Ridge's poetry as a whole, perhaps this type of attention from the mainstream media and scholarship, such as this dissertation, will garner Ridge's work more visibility.

<sup>26</sup> See Drake; Berke for feminist readings. Berke's section, which focuses on "The Ghetto," titled "Murillo's Mulatto: A Feminist in the Ghetto" discusses a story Ridge told in a lecture she gave titled "Woman and the Creative Will." In this lecture, Ridge tells a story about Spanish painter Bartolomeo Murillo in which a slave's talent for painting is discovered and he is allowed to practice the craft. Ridge's point is that had the slave been female she would have been "raped and left to forget her dreams" (Berke 67). As Berke discusses, contemporary readers hear echoes of Virginia Woolf's story regarding Judith Shakespeare, Shakespeare's sister, in her essay "A Room of One's Own." Though readers today probably hear Ridge echoed in Woolf, it is really Woolf who echoes Ridge as Ridge's lecture was given in 1919, almost ten years before Woolf gave the lectures that would lead to "A Room of One's Own."

<sup>27</sup> Occasional poetry is notoriously difficult to write, though many of our most cherished poems are occasional in nature.

current social issues (many of which remain little changed since Ridge's time). Ridge's career is therefore of twofold importance in the discussion of activist poetry: first, Ridge believed in poetry as a means of activism, and second, her poetic record, though repeatedly "lost" in terms of scholars' study, contains elements of activism that are still meaningful today. Further, Ridge's poetic activism matches human suffering with the ways the environment that humans inhabit is part and parcel to the suffering the endure.

In a review of *The Ghetto* for *The Dial* in 1919, critic Conrad Aiken, writes, "Here it is the human item that most attracts Miss Ridge—Jews, for the most part, seen darkly and warmly against a background of social consciousness, of rebelliousness even. She arranges her figures for us with a muscular force which seems masculine; it is singular to come upon a book written by a woman in which vigor is so clearly a more natural quality than grace." This review of *The Ghetto* points to two elements of interest to the loss and then recovery of Ridge's work: the political/social aspect derived from focusing on a minority population in an urban area and the gender bias that comes from a woman taking this as her subject. That Aiken describes Ridge's depiction of Jews as "seen darkly and warmly against a background of social consciousness" points to the fact that, like Gwendolyn Brooks later, Ridge shows both sides of the population, their successes and failures in adapting to American life. Though not impartial, Ridge does develop a full picture of life in the ghetto. This is to say, Ridge does not generalize as she describes a variety of immigrants: some residents, Sadie or the young peddler for example,<sup>28</sup> are more successfully able to navigate life in the ghetto while others struggle

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<sup>28</sup> See Section IV:

"But this young trader  
Born to trade as to a caul



to adapt—the old men in “this dingy café” are “muffled” by more than “woollens” (17). Regardless, Ridge chooses a minority population whose presence is necessary (directly in terms of labor for developing industries, here largely in textiles) but whose situation is both hidden (separated from the more well-to do, established American culture by the boundaries of the area and the restraints of long working hours) and ignored.

The second claim in Aiken’s review (“She arranges her figures for us with a muscular force which seems masculine”) betrays a gender bias as “grace” is associated with women and “muscular force” is described as masculine. For women of Ridge’s era and beyond, marshalling their poetry towards social consciousness breaks from standard subject matter (“rebellious”) and from standard poetic delivery (“vigor” over “grace”).<sup>29</sup> Femininity in terms of poetic content usually takes the form of domestic images and issues—whether love, home, nature, or other issues relegated to the female sphere.<sup>30</sup> Aiken implies in his review, with his comment that Ridge writes with a vigor uncommon for others of her gender, that women poets approach their craft differently than male poets. In this way, he questions the validity of women witnessing because to this point their experiences have been seen through the gauze of femininity. Ridge’s poetry seems masculine in no small part due to its unflinching depictions of difficult and unjust circumstances—circumstances under which many women suffered but few of whom had

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[...]  
Looks Westward where the trade-lights glow,  
And sees his vision rise—” (14-5).

<sup>29</sup> The trend of regarding political poetry written by women as rebellious is apparent in discussions of Gwendolyn Brooks’ work as well. For example, see Kathryn Lindberg, “Whose Canon? Gwendolyn Brooks: Founder at the Center of the ‘Margins’” for a discussion of how gender affects Brooks’ reception.

<sup>30</sup> Even if the content has veiled political implications, the images themselves remain connected to what in the day would be considered the feminine realm—Emily Dickinson, for example. There are, of course, female poets who challenge this generalization; a much earlier example who demonstrates the pull between feminine and masculine iconography in her poetry and person is Queen Elizabeth.

the audiences required in witnessing. If Aiken is surprised by a woman's ability to convey the rough, dirty, and crowded streets of the ghetto, it is because Ridge is one of the first women of the era to bring the setting to literary audiences.

Since her own time, few scholars have made Ridge the center of their research as evidenced by the fact that since 1987 she has appeared as a central figure in only three scholarly books.<sup>31</sup> In 1987 William Drake published *The First Wave: Women Poets in America 1915-1945*, and in it Drake examines the familial and maternal relationships surrounding female modernist poets' lives as well as the ways those relationships manifest in their poetry. Ridge receives close attention in two chapters: "Poets as Daughters" and "The Quest for an Alternative Vision." In these chapters Drake attempts to draw attention to the work of an understudied female poet among other female poets of her era. His attention remains close to the relationship between Ridge and her mother while arguing for her "idealism, mysticism, and desire to seek change through her writing" (Maun 33). Two years later Cary Nelson references Ridge as a poet who has been almost entirely ignored by scholars in *Repression and Recovery*. Nelson dedicates more space to the discussion of male poets, and of the women poets mentioned, he mainly uses Ridge as an example of a female poet interested in politics whose work has been consistently forgotten.

There is a nearly fifteen year gap between Drake's book and Nancy Berke's *Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker* (2001), the next close study of Ridge's work. Berke's chapter, similar to Nelson's project, is an

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<sup>31</sup> William Drake's *The First Wave*, Nancy Berke's *Women Poets on the Left*, and Caroline Maun's *Mosaic of Fire*. Ridge has made appearances in other books, but she does not receive the close attention of a central figure.

attempt to recover Ridge as a poet. Berke examines the reason for scholars' persistent lack of work on Ridge, citing her gender in relationship to her politically engaged poetry as well as issues regarding scholars' examinations of historical events in relationship to the study of modernist women poets. The most recent book publication to feature an extended study of Ridge is Caroline Maun's *Mosaic of Fire: The Work of Lola Ridge, Evelyn Scott, Charlotte Wilder, and Kay Boyle* (2012). Like her predecessors Drake and Berke, Maun situates Ridge among her contemporaries and does so in order to highlight the relationships American women modernists had with each other and the ways in which they "sought to grapple with major social issues in their poetry" (1). In her chapter on Ridge, "Imagism, Socially Engaged Poetry, and Lola Ridge," Maun reiterates Ridge's biographic information, specifically focusing on Ridge's friendships with other modernist women poets, her work as an editor, and her poems that are particularly socially engaged.

It has only been in the last ten years that scholars have begun to publish more articles specifically on Ridge as well as introductions and other materials that provide close readings of Ridge's poetry.<sup>32</sup> Of particular note among these pieces is Daniel Tobin's scholarship on Ridge. In 2004, Tobin described Ridge as a "notable lone figure standing amidst the crowds of our American literary history, at once recognizable in the wider aesthetic and cultural currents of her time, but nevertheless curiously otherwise" (66). In the introduction to *Light in the Hand: Selected Early Poems of Lola Ridge*, Tobin describes Ridge's Irish heritage and gives a close reading of "The Ghetto."<sup>33</sup> Ridge's life before immigrating to America is central to the work of New Zealand scholar Michele

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<sup>32</sup> The most popular poems in terms of scholars' study have been "The Ghetto," "Lullaby," "Stone Face," "Frank Little at Calvary," and excerpts from *Firehead*.

<sup>33</sup> As Maun notes in her discussion of the Tobin edited selected Ridge, there has yet to be a scholarly collected edition of Ridge's poetry.

Leggott who argues for the way Ridge's time spent in Australia and New Zealand appears in her later book *Sun-Up and Other Poems* (1920). Leggott connects Ridge's poetry to a deep understanding of the differences between the environments and cultures of Australia and New Zealand as well as an awareness of the indigenous cultures.<sup>34</sup>

Whereas many of the earlier researchers on Ridge spend a large portion of their time detailing her relationships (with her mother, with other women writers, with the attendees at the meetings she frequently held in her apartment), many of the most recent articles published on Ridge tend to focus on her role as an editor for the little magazines of the early twentieth century and also the ways in which Ridge acted as organizer of poetic meetings.<sup>35</sup> Of note are two articles published in flagship journals: Belinda Wheeler's "Lola Ridge's Pivotal Editorial Role at *Broom*" published in *PMLA* in 2012 and Cristanne Miller's previously mentioned "Tongue 'loosened in the melting pot.'" Both articles revitalize the study of Ridge's role as an editor and make strong cases for her editorship as the vehicle by which Ridge shaped what we now consider American modernist poetry. In other words, these articles direct attention towards Ridge as an editor and literary personality.

Recovery of Ridge's poetry itself is still quite necessary as her writing not only expands the understanding of the projects of modernism but also represents alternate ways of understanding social, political, and environmental interactions during the period. Because Ridge's poetry has been so little studied, a great number of readings remain not only viable but potentially productive—not the least of which is reading Ridge's urban

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<sup>34</sup> Leggott's argument centers on recovering Ridge as a poet before she became an American poet. No scholarship yet exists that reads the *Sun-Up and Other Poems* for environmental concerns and Ridge's knowledge of indigenous culture.

<sup>35</sup> Drake is particularly interested in Ridge's relationship with her mother and other women writers.

modernist aesthetic for the way it depicts understandings of the interaction of humans with cities. The closest current scholars have come to discussing the environment is in Nancy Berke's article "'Electric Currents of Life': Lola Ridge's Immigrant Flaneuserie" in which she describes the speaker of "The Ghetto" as an "immigrant flaneuse, a new world poet ambling the streets of her 'vigorous,' yet 'startling' new home" (28).<sup>36</sup> I question Berke's description of Ridge's speaker as a flaneuse because the narrator's subject position and subjectivity play important roles in the ways that "The Ghetto" is constructed and in the ways that the poem represents an instance of social and environmental injustice. A flaneuse merely takes in the scene—she may reflect on it, but she is not a participant-observer in the way that Ridge is. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a flaneur, the male form of the word, as "a loungeur or saunterer, an idle 'man about town.'" Flaneuserie, as it is traditionally described, is undertaken by higher classes who have the free time to lounge, and though they, to use Berke's language, "amble" through the city, the parts of the city that a flaneuse observes are rarely those that poor immigrants inhabit. Thus, the view of the city, particularly the American city that Ridge uncovers in "The Ghetto," is not the view a flaneuse would describe, and this is important in terms of understanding Ridge's project. Ridge's subject position, that of a fellow immigrant, means that she is one step removed from the injustice about which she witnesses and has access and understanding of the Lower East Side that someone just passing through would not. Ultimately, describing the everyday interactions of immigrants with historical accuracy in order to bring about awareness is outside the

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<sup>36</sup> Both Aiken, from Ridge's own period, and Berke, writing today, use the word "vigor" to describe Ridge's work and this poem in particular.

purview of flaneuserie but in line with attempts to bear witness to social and environmental injustice.

Descriptions of the environment are especially noteworthy in Ridge's poetry about social issues as she critiques the treatment of the immigrants in terms of the environments they inhabit. In many poems, but especially in "The Ghetto," Ridge includes specific description of the landscape and draws connections between that environment and the social injustices that occur therein. For example, in section XIII, she writes,

Lights go out  
And the stark trunks of the factories  
Melt into the drawn darkness,  
Sheathing like a seamless garment. (21)

In this passage from near the end of the poem, Ridge calls the smokestacks of the factories "stark trunks," which aligns an element of the urban landscape with trees in a forest. Further, language such as "stark," "drawn darkness," "sheathing," and "seamless" all emphasize the bleakness of the environment the immigrants inhabit as well as the ways in which that bleakness acts as a form of entrapment. To understand the human condition one must understand the environmental condition, and the social interactions with which Ridge is most directly concerned are predicated on the unfair allocation of environmental resources. Thus, Ridge's depictions of the Lower East Side indicate an awareness of the complexity of the oppression faced there that predates scholarly theories of environmental racism in the United States by over half a century.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Chavez coins the term "environmental racism" in 1987 (Adamson, *American Indian* 76).

The previous research that comes closest to these connections is Miller's work, which discusses the racial makeup of the ghetto, paying specific attention to the Jewish population and drawing connections between immigrants and the aesthetics espoused by modernist poets. Miller discusses Ridge's descriptions of urban life with attention to the environment but mostly in an effort to illustrate the backdrop on which the characters are drawn: "Ridge depicts unflinchingly the misery of life in such crowded conditions for an impoverished populace—the winter's icy cold and summer's 'beast' of heat 'pressing its great steaming belly close' to the 'dissolute array' of the streets" (461). Miller focuses on the social and political issues that were Ridge's main concern. I'd like to examine more fully, however, how Ridge describes the setting of the ghetto with a sense of its role in social injustice—that is, how the environment is wielded as a form of oppression. Thus, Ridge describes the "misery of life in crowded conditions," but she also draws connections among culture, society, and the environment and the very real consequences of environmental racism.

### **"The Ghetto," the Lower East Side, and Overlooked Landscapes**

Ridge immigrated to the United States from New Zealand when she was 34 years old (in approximately 1907) and settled in New York City in 1908 (Drake).<sup>38</sup> Ridge lived and worked on the Lower East Side where, until she married her second husband, she worked as a model, illustrator, factory worker, and editor. The Lower East Side was the most densely populated place in the world at the turn of the century (Sanders 13). More

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<sup>38</sup> Ridge subtracted 10 years from her age when she immigrated and also claimed to be Australian. Her first residence in the United States was in San Francisco in 1907 but by 1908 she had moved to New York City (Tobin ix).

generally, most of the city's population of 3,437,000 lived below 14<sup>th</sup> Street while northern Manhattan and the Bronx remained relatively undeveloped (Derrick 2; Sansome ix). Photographs taken of Hester Street in 1900 illustrate the chaos and overpopulation of the ghetto.<sup>39</sup> In 1910, 31 percent of the population of New York City was Jewish, and a large portion of that 31 percent lived in the ghetto (Miller 458). Though by this point the residents of the ghetto were primarily Jewish, the countries of origin for the occupants varied and altered over time. Religion may have united the area, but other shared issues, such as labor practices, cultural assimilation, and political beliefs, drove much of the unrest associated with the area and were of particular importance to Ridge and her writing of "The Ghetto." When writers of the era referred to "The Ghetto," they were understood to mean both the location, the Lower East Side, but also the large population of Jews who largely inhabited that area (Sanders 1).<sup>40</sup> The historic record of the Lower East Side is necessary in order to understand "The Ghetto" and Ridge's role in interpreting that neighborhood, that specific network of New York City, just after the turn of the century.

From after the Civil War to approximately the turn of the century, before Ridge immigrated to the US, the ghetto occupied the blocks where Canal and Essex Streets intersected with East Broadway. The ghetto that Ridge writes about is an expanded

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<sup>39</sup> See Sanders, *The Lower East Side: A Guide to Its Jewish Past in 99 Photographs* for images of the Lower East Side, a portion of which were taken from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These images consistently convey the overpopulation, chaos, deterioration, and business of this area of New York City around the turn of the century.

<sup>40</sup> Among the authors Sanders lists as using the term "The Ghetto" are "the fine New York writers" Lincoln Steffens and Hutchins Hapgood (Sanders 12). The writers Sanders mentions, themselves often forgotten now, are white men, but both are remembered for their attention to the oppressed populations living in New York City. That is, these writers were well-versed in the blight of immigrants and lower class people in tenement housing.



version, extending southward, eastward, and northward (to Delancey and East Houston Streets). Many buildings in the Lower East Side, like other heavily populated, urban slums, were originally built to house the wealthy in the early nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup> Due to the proximity of factories and the fact many of these buildings were built over the filled-in Collect Pond, the buildings deteriorated and sank, and thus, immigrants, primarily Irish, moved into the area as it was close to docks and factories (Sanders 14). Many of the immigrants who lived in the areas that bordered the Lower East Side during the nineteenth century were unlucky in their pursuit of the American Dream and found themselves in what became a slum (Sanders 14). Five Points, the intersections of what are now called Worth, Baxter and Park Streets, acted as a pseudo boundary for established New Yorkers, immigrants or not, and new immigrants, many of them leaving middle/working-class lifestyles in Europe, flocked to the area where opportunities for jobs and housing were more widely available.

The Lower East Side housed the working class “almost from the outset” and saw waves of immigrants occupy its space as political and social turmoil abroad brought them to the US seeking jobs and freedom. The potato famine drove many Irish immigrants to the Lower East Side in the 1840s, and failed revolutions in Central Europe brought a large number of immigrants after 1848. By 1878, intellectuals from Europe began immigrating to New York City largely because of the German Bismarck’s antisocialist law and the promise of cultural, religious, political, and social freedom: “Socialism

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<sup>41</sup> In this dissertation, the other notable example of minority populations living in what once was upper-class housing comes from Chapter 3 and is the deterioration of the Mecca Building as described in Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “In the Mecca.” Originally built as a luxury apartment building for wealthy whites, the Mecca became tenement housing for African Americans when they sought jobs in urban locations of the North as part of the Great Migration.

became a prominent subject of discussion in the beer halls and cafes of the Lower East Side, as well as a main source of energy for both the English-speaking and German-speaking circles of the New York labor movement. Ultimately, socialism also was an important source of energy for Yiddish-speaking labor movements in its beginnings on the Lower East Side” (Sanders 16). By 1880, Italy and the Russian Empire were the two most common origins of the more than 28 million immigrants who would enter the US before 1920. The Italian immigrants were predominantly Catholic, and the Russians primarily practiced Judaism. The immigration of Russian Jews occurred after 1881 when a series of anti-Jewish riots broke out after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II.

Until about 1870, no distinct Jewish neighborhood existed in New York City, and many Jewish immigrants had spent time in English speaking countries (Britain or the West Indies) before immigrating and so were “hardly distinguishable from any other middle-class group in religious variety that made up the New York Scene from the outset” (Sanders 3). In the mid-nineteenth century, German immigration to the US rose and with it came a more unified Jewish-American life. Further, burgeoning Jewish neighborhoods in the United States stemmed in part from the boom of textile and clothing manufacturing in Eastern Europe: immigrants from these countries brought skills in the production and sale of textiles with them to the US. Canal Street, two blocks south of Grand Street, a shopping hub of New York for the majority of the nineteenth century, was the location of “the wholesale clothing and textile suppliers” (Sanders 45). Many of the immigrants who owned and were employed in these businesses were Eastern European Jews. Hester Street, between Grand Street and Canal Street, was filled with pushcarts where scraps of fabric, buttons, and clothing were sold. The garment industry

did not require physically demanding manual labor, and many of the jobs allowed for advancement or at least “activity and transience” (Sanders 19). Families often operated small-scale clothing manufacturing businesses out of their front rooms; with no running water and a wood burning stove for cooking as well as heating the iron for pressing, the tenement housing was crowded and stifling.<sup>42</sup>

Housing became of great concern as immigrants “continued to pour into New York, [resulting in] ‘bestial overcrowding’ in the tenement districts” (Derrick 3). Further, the extreme overcrowding in impoverished and working-class areas bred disease and violence, ostensibly caused by the close quarters and unsafe buildings. The situation was so pervasive and dire that “many believed that traditional relief efforts, such as housing reform, child labor reform, and settlement houses, would be of little help unless the density of population in slum areas was reduced” (Derrick 4). Thus, the development of the rapid transit system in New York City was designed to alleviate these troubles by encouraging residents to live in other areas of New York City. Elevated railroads and the subway (the first incarnation of which opened in 1904) are credited with enabling the development of New York City as it is known today (Sansome x).

The Library of Congress gives a historic account of the conditions these immigrants lived and worked in on the Lower East Side. The page on the Library of Congress website titled “Immigration: Lower East Side” contains the following passage:

[C]ongestion brought with it many hazards, along with many annoyances.

Nearly half of the city’s deaths by fire took place in the Lower East Side.

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<sup>42</sup> The Tenement Museum, which offers tours through apartments renovated to maintain historic accuracy, offers a great deal of information on the living conditions for these families as well as census numbers confirming the number of people housed in a two room apartment.

Disease was rampant, clean water was hard to come by, and privacy was unheard of. For many immigrant children, their education in American life was acquired in the city streets, where lovers strolled amid streams of raw sewage, vendors offered almost anything for sale, con artists and petty thieves worked the crowds, and horse carriages burdened with goods clogged the muddy roadways.

With the privilege of nearly a hundred years hindsight, the Library of Congress' description of the Lower East Side draws attention to the "hazards" of living in the ghetto, many of which are readily understood today as environmental in nature: cramped living conditions (which often led to death by fire because of the combination of chaotic living spaces, wood burning stoves, and the lack of running water), disease, lack of clean water, raw sewage in the streets, and dangerous, chaotic streets full of carts, horses, and other vehicles.

Ridge's descriptions of the Lower East Side match and embody the historical data that researchers provide. Ridge's passage about Hester Street, a picture of which appears atop the Library of Congress entry, occurs in Section I of "The Ghetto":

The heat in Hester Street,  
Heaped like a dray  
With the garbage of the world.

Bodies dangle from the fire escapes  
Or sprawl over the stoops...

Upturned faces glimmer pallidly—

Herring-yellow faces, spotted as with a mold (3)

The Library of Congress discusses “congestion” and a lack of privacy, disease as “rampant,” and the streets as containing “raw sewage.”<sup>43</sup> Ridge’s stanzas similarly point to these social issues, connecting them to the environment by creating a feeling of oppression through the image of heat. The heat all at once represents the closeness of too many people, the chaos of the streets peddlers, and the general restriction of the isolated area. Ridge uses a simile to describe the heat: “like a dray / with the garbage of the world.” The hyperbole of the amount of garbage coupled with the dray (a cart used for hauling, not unlike the carts used to peddle wares on Canal Street) emphasize the chaotic nature of the ghetto. Ridge continues in the next six lines, the other stanza quoted above, to illustrate the illness. By describing the people as “bodies,” Ridge emphasizes their physicality, not their humanity while also relying on the connotation of “bodies dangle” to mean dead bodies hanging. The death and disease imagery continues with language such as “pallidly,” “mold,” “moist,” “dank,” “parched” and “empty,” which at best indicate decay and at worst death. Just as the Library of Congress addresses the ill effects of ghetto life for children, Ridge specifically references the children and infants in the poem’s fourth stanza. Ridge articulates the shortcomings, dangers, and ultimately the challenges for Jewish immigrants specifically and the urban working-class and poor populations in general.

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<sup>43</sup> The most poetic moment of the passage from the Library of Congress website, I’d argue, is the use of the lovers strolling through raw sewage—it certainly conjures up a specific and disgusting image. It was not necessary to identify the people walking in the street as lovers, but the description adds contrast to the loveliness of young love and the unappealing image of sewage.

That Ridge translates a historically accurate image of the ghetto through poetry invites a discussion of the poetic medium as a powerful mechanism for not only the recording of factual history but also the transmission of the unquantifiable, unverifiable feelings associated with everyday life. Ridge employs poetic devices, most notably similes, to engage the reader in an experience of the ghetto that expands factual accounts both sonically and imagistically; by bombarding the reader with sensory stimuli, Ridge brings the reader into the ghetto as a fellow observer. Poetry as a form of witness, then, is predicated on the pairing of historical fact with emotional weight.

### **Secondary Witnessing to Urban Environmental Racism**

Ridge once said, “The machine age of America should by all means be represented, but interpreted not reported” (qtd. in Berke, *Women* 51). Ridge distinguishes here between goals of representation: it is not enough to merely report the facts, but rather those facts have to be interpreted in order for the representation to have visceral meaning as well as the possibility of eliciting a response. A report may convey the ostensible facts of an experience—how, what, when, where, even why—but, particularly in occasions of trauma or injustice, the facts do not do justice to the extrasensory experiences that accompany the situation’s facts. In Ridge’s statement regarding the machine age in America, she indicates the human element necessary in understanding history—to record information about machines in America neglects the feelings humans have in regards to machines, the progress machines bring as well as their dangers, and the overall cultural atmosphere of the era. Thus, Ridge seeks to do more in her poetry than record a certain place in a certain time; for Ridge, the recording of a certain place in a

certain time puts equal weight on place, time, people, culture, and what witnessing theorist Kelly Oliver calls that which is “beyond [factual] recognition.”

Though emphasizing the full scope of the experience, complete with the feelings associated with living in an unjust environment, Ridge is careful not to make the injustice her own. She introduces a first person narration fairly early in “The Ghetto” (at the beginning of the second section), and it is through this choice of narration that Ridge makes clear her role as a participant-observer. The speaker of the poem, like Ridge herself, resides in the ghetto but is not of Jewish descent. The first person voice introduces itself and reappears intermittently in the poem, as if to remind the reader that this is partially her story but also a story that she is observing from a distance. Ridge writes,

I room at Sodos’—in the little green room that was Bennie’s—  
With Sadie  
And her old father and her mother,  
Who is not so old and wears her own hair.<sup>44</sup> (5)

In this passage, Ridge establishes the speaker as a character who has firsthand experience of the environment that gives her poem its title. We do not know much more than the fact that the speaker is a boarder at Sodos, which tells us that the family must take on a boarder in order to earn money. Knowing only that the speaker is a resident-observer has implications on our reading because it places the emphasis squarely on the people being described rather than her own situation. The speaker is only important in regards to what

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<sup>44</sup> Orthodox Jewish women would wear wigs after they were married--showing one's hair is seen as attracting other men's attention, so all women wear wigs. This passage also, therefore, contributes to the reader's knowledge about the immigrants' positioning between Jewish and American culture.

she can relay to the readers about life in the ghetto—she is the secondary witness who, though oppressed herself in some ways (especially socioeconomically), is not the central figure in the injustices that she witnesses.

Ridge's repeated use of an identified first person for the narrator's voice more clearly constructs the narrator, which also serves to develop the position of a secondary witness, one who observes, records, and interprets the experiences of living on the Lower East Side, but who is not Jewish and who is not, at least any longer, part of the lower class.<sup>45</sup> According to theories of witnessing, secondary witnesses, those not directly affected by the experienced being witnessed to, must allow those with experiential positions to "work through" the experience without having to relive it; thus, a secondary witness must be empathetic yet maintain boundaries of subject position: "To see oneself as a subject and to see other people as *the other* or objects not only alienates one from those around him but also enables the dehumanization inherent in oppression and domination. It is easier to justify domination, oppression, and torture if one's victims are imagined as inferior, less human, or merely objects who exist to serve subjects" (Oliver 182, emphasis in original). The maintenance of boundaries between subjects in witnessing is especially important because the aim of secondary witnessing is to help oppressed populations gain visibility and voice, not deny their subjectivity a second time.

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<sup>45</sup> By 1918 Ridge earned enough money to be considered middle-class, but she chose to live a fairly ascetic lifestyle. William Carlos Williams, a regular attendee of Ridge's salons, at points "mocked" her for these choices (Poetry Foundation), but he also appreciated Ridge's zeal for the urban masses: "Ridge held parties for the writers and painters and radical thinkers in that New York ambience with an attention that verged for Williams on a religious commitment" (Mariani 173).



Ridge begins the poem with the stark living conditions of the immigrants in order to register the inequity of their situation, which invites a further investigation of the broader causes and implications of the social injustice she highlights:

Although “The Ghetto” persuades in favor of new immigrants, it has even greater social significance by preparing readers to grasp the ill effects of capitalistic industrialization on this group. Because immigrants comprised large numbers of the urban poor and the labor class, they experienced the squalor of rapid urban development and horrendous working conditions in low paying jobs. (Allego)

A seemingly large portion of the inequity the immigrants face can be attributed to the substandard environment that they inhabit. As the above passage indicates, previous scholarship about “The Ghetto” has focused on Jewish immigrants as a cause obviously important to Ridge’s documented social activism, but very little has been made of the fact that her portrayal of the people’s blight is specifically, carefully located. That is, Ridge’s attention to the environment in which minorities and lower class populations live indicates her awareness of what environmental critics will later term “environmental racism,” the disproportionate denial of access to healthy and safe landscapes based primarily on race and class. Though Ridge lacked this terminology, her poetic choices both in image and in poetic technique point to her view of social and environmental justice as interconnected—thinking far ahead of her time.

As is often typical with the housing of minority and immigrant populations, de facto segregation (often predicated on class status, education, and employment) meant that though connections to other areas of the city were becoming more tenable with new

lines of the subway opening, poor, immigrant populations were still crammed into small areas for decades as “progress” happened around them.<sup>46</sup> By 1920, the newly expanded subway promised a “democratized” future for New York City, but the reality Ridge documents in her poem is one of isolation—integration into the city and culture at large may have been on the horizon but that horizon was hazy with factory smoke and heat and immigrants were not yet privy to the newly democratized urban landscape. Ridge represents the people and the landscape of the ghetto as part of an interconnected immigrant network that cannot, as of yet, participate in the network promised by the technology and expansion of modernism’s New York.

Ridge points out two major elements of the environmental racism she sees at play in the ghetto: oppression and isolation. The two forces unite to breed a continual state of injustice, which Ridge opposes but also sees as largely unsolvable. It should be said directly: Ridge does not see the city, as a physical space, as inherently problematic.<sup>47</sup> She does, however, find the unfair and unsafe practices associated with the ghetto, a particular area of the city governed by exclusionary forces, to be dangerous. Thus, the network constitutive of a city is only a threat when the network is broken, overtaxed, or denied, all of which have strong environmental components. The opening section of “The Ghetto” provides a detailed description of the Lower East Side that emphasizes the insularity of the environment:

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<sup>46</sup>The Dual System of Rapid Transit, the project approved in 1913 and near complete by 1920 that doubled the New York City subway system, expanded the subway system throughout the Lower East Side. See Derrick’s chapter “Impact of the Dual System.”

<sup>47</sup> Early critics of environmental literature often saw urban environments as separate or even opposed to rural environments, primarily studying “nature writing” and the environments such writing describes. More recent critics have worked to rectify this binary because many writers, among them Ridge, have long understood that there should not be an inherent value judgment ascribed to place, and urban environments are interconnected to as well as equal to rural ones (Buell; Adamson & Slovic).

Cool, inaccessible air  
Is floating in velvety blackness shot with steel-blue lights,  
But no breath stirs the heat  
Leaning its ponderous bulk upon the Ghetto  
And most on Hester Street...

The heat...  
Nosing in the body's overflow,  
Like a beast pressing its great steaming belly close,  
Covering all avenues of air...(3)

Ridge opens the poem with the contrast between the cool air, which the residents of the ghetto do not have access to, and the heat of the ghetto, which presses against the area and compounds its claustrophobic feel. The adjective “inaccessible” resonates with the lack of access to healthy environments that is a core trait of instances of environmental racism. Language like “no breath,” “leaning,” and “bulk” points to the futility of ghetto life, especially in comparisons to the descriptors attributed to the rest of the city: “cool,” “floating,” and “velvety blackness.” The language of the rest of the city is not negatively charged as with the heftiness of the ghetto’s oppression, and so in the first stanza Ridge distinguishes not between rural and urban but between the qualities of the urban, specifically healthy and unhealthy. The “velvety blackness shot with steel-blue lights” is often the image chosen to represent many city skylines on postcards today and is thus a positive image but one tantalizingly beyond the grasp of the ghetto-dwellers. “Steel-blue lights” point to the technology and advancement that are, like coolness, inaccessible to

the ghetto residents. Thus, the most often occurring word in the opening section of the poem, “heat,” becomes poetically inescapable, the repetition of the word serving to create the feeling of oppression. By characterizing the heat as a form of outside pressure against the ghetto as an individual entity, Ridge calls attention to the separation between this area and the rest of the city.

The environment and the human participants in that environment are all part of a system or network—if the network is controlled by corrupt institutional forces, violence occurs to all of the constituent entities. Priscilla Wald discusses the history of theories regarding this “structural violence” in her 2011 Presidential address at the American Studies Conference:

Networks focus on the dynamic nature of social interactions and roles, of centers and peripheries, and of manifestations and locations of power. They are neither intrinsically liberatory nor innately pernicious, although contemporary depictions often attribute such characteristics to the network per se. They do not offer endless possibility. But the concept offers new analytic foci: networks depict the dynamism of social relations and agency—the variety of ways in which humans and nonhumans act in and on the world. Such depictions may help us think in new ways about how change works. And in so doing they could provide an alternative conceptual field imaginary: “America” as the name of a node, an ever-changing site of intersecting lines. (196)

Ultimately, Ridge remains uncritical of cities but very critical of the social and political apparatuses that provide unequal access to environmental resources in certain neighborhoods of those cities.

### **A Poetics of Secondary Witnessing and Environmental Awareness**

Ridge indicates that the environment of the ghetto is weaponized and therefore a means of oppression and segregation; her depiction implies theoretical concepts that have important impacts on social activists in the early twentieth century. Ridge, however, also expands the possibilities of modernist poetic devices in order to portray the intersections of social and environmental injustice. Berke discusses much of Ridge's poetry as being Imagist, and therefore, she argues that "The Ghetto" can be read in the same vein as, say, Ezra Pound's "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter": a poem comprised of a series of images that when seen in aggregate illustrate a larger story, emotion, or experience.<sup>48</sup> "The Ghetto" does not appear to align with the tenets of the most famous Imagist works, such as the short poems of William Carlos Williams or H.D., but Berke maintains that the images in "The Ghetto" yield a meaning through their overlay and combination. Thus, Ridge furthers the modernist aesthetic by challenging the scope of Imagist techniques.

A significant difference in Ridge's version of Imagism, an aspect Berke does not discuss, is that the meaning Ridge encodes in her imagery is politically and socially

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<sup>48</sup> Imagism is a poetic movement that occurs in the early twentieth century in both England and America. Practitioners profess to desire a "clarity of expression through the use of precise visual images." For a recent discussion of Imagism see Andrew Hay, "On the Shore."

engaged.<sup>49</sup> Though “The Ghetto” does capture the culture and setting of the Lower East Side, the central images are created and ordered in a manner that asks for recognition not only of the physical world but also the feelings and emotions that those with power ignore. Adding a socially conscious perspective to poetic imagery alters the way the images are perceived. Thus, the images do operate in much the same way as Pound’s pictograms, the stacking of images that combines to form new meanings. “The Ghetto” is comprised of nine sections, and the overall movement of the poem is dependent on the subject matter of each individual section.<sup>50</sup> In this way, the images (most often portraits and landscapes) have a collage effect that, like the ghetto, overwhelms the reader with stimuli, both positive and negative but always chaotic. The focus of each section can be described as follows:

- The first section features a series of images that draw attention to the physical environment and provides a contrast between other areas of the city and the ghetto.
- The second section introduces the use of a first person speaker who describes her own living situation, paying particular attention to the ways the Jewish family with whom the narrator lives and their neighbors exist on the cusp between tradition and modern, urban living.

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<sup>49</sup> Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow” and H.D.’s “Oread” are two examples of often anthologized Imagist poems. Both are only a few lines, give no strong indication of meaning beyond description of a scene, and ask the reader to infer a meaning for themselves.

<sup>50</sup> See Berke, “Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in Lola Ridge’s ‘The Ghetto.’” Some scholars compare the poem’s sections to the nine months of pregnancy in order to generally align the poem with its female author. Another reading of the sections as months of pregnancy, one I find more compelling, is that the poem describes the birth of the immigrant’s new way of life in America. That is, the poem details the way in which an immigrant establishes an, at least partially, successful American identity. Though this reading may be more or less accurate, it does not establish the poem as activist nor does it attend to the ways in which Ridge witnesses to the difficulties associated with immigrants’ American births.

- The third section focuses on the children who live in the ghetto.
- Section four describes Grand Street where goods are for sale. The specific naming of the street has historical significance.
- The fifth section returns to the narrator's first person narration and discusses her room and the people she encounters in the neighborhood.
- Section six describes the interaction between old men and young men in a café—the young men being politically radical and the old men being far more traditional.
- The seventh section repeats the words “egos” and “words” and illustrates the difficulty with both in the environment of the ghetto.
- Section eight occurs at sunset and features the ghetto at night with a sexualized description of the moon.
- The final section repeatedly returns to the word “Life!” and emphasizes that despite the difficulties of living in the ghetto, the people will continue to live on.

Each section then can be read as a series of images that center around a certain location (whether a café, Hester Street, or the room in which the speaker stays); when the sections are all taken together, the meaning of the poem as a whole is derived from the combination of all the sections' locations and the feelings those locations elicit. The difference, however, between Ridge's Imagism and Pound's conception is that the intent of stacking the images is far more directed—Ridge creates the images in order to record, interpret, and bring awareness to as yet unseen or unrecognized injustices. Ridge's

ordering of the sections therefore matters in ways that the order of the descriptors in other Imagist poems does not.

The core tenets of Imagism are also altered and expanded by Ridge's consistent use of similes, figurative language that is entirely omitted in many other Imagist poems, or as in "In a Station of the Metro," replaced with punctuation. M.H. Abrams defines a simile as "a comparison between two distinctly different things...explicitly indicated by the word 'like' or 'as'" (97). In Imagism the gesture toward metaphor is elided for the thing itself or implied through grammatical comparison. Ridge's repeated use of similes then draws attention to a poetic device, emphasizing that language mediates the image as well as highlights Ridge's position as a poet witness. Repeatedly returning to similes that unite what are often seen as "different" images, Ridge demonstrates an awareness of similarities between what have been previously seen as separate. This unity or equality is especially important in breaking down the binaries between urban and rural, natural and unnatural, and American and immigrant.

The similes Ridge employs often connect the ghetto's landscape to more readily understood natural landscapes, especially in the early twentieth century—both in states of chaos and deterioration. For example, there are eight similes in the first section of the poem, and all of them relate the ghetto to images of decay, oppression, or futility: "The street crawls undulant, / *Like* a river addled / with its hot tide of flesh that ever thickens" (4, emphasis added). This simile is especially relevant when discussing the way Ridge depicts the environment because it ties a street, something particularly urban, to a river, something quintessentially natural yet still notably rotten. The natural element, which is traditionally associated with beauty, is corrupted by decay, emphasizing that there is little



difference between the dangers unhealthy environments can pose. The similes Ridge chooses over the course of the poem often function in much the same way as the “addled river”: an aspect of urban life is compared to a rural element but both are deteriorated or lacking.<sup>51</sup> Repeated so often, these similes have the effect of making the injustice of poor living conditions seem reprehensible and obvious in any environment, whether urban or rural.

Ridge begins the poem with a description of the landscape, but quickly transitions to portraits of the residents. Just as the similes comparing urban and rural environments hinge on illustrating the similarities between what could be seen as very different landscapes, Ridge emphasizes the connections between the environment and the people, both part of a network that is broken and harmful. In other words, Ridge’s reliance on similes that unite images of states of decline, demise, and disorder with images of the ghetto and its residents has the effect of highlighting the interconnectedness of the two—that is, the ecological system of the ghetto is comprised of both non-human and human elements, and the neglect of one results in problems for both. The first section includes the lines:

Bodies dangle from the fire escapes  
Or sprawl over the stoops...  
Upturned faces glimmer pallidly—  
Herring-yellow faces, spotted as with a mold,  
And moist faces of girls  
Like dank white lilies,

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<sup>51</sup> See Appendix A for a more thorough treatment of each simile.

And infants' faces with open parched mouths

That suck at the air as at empty teats. (3)

The faces at first glance seem positively described with the word “glimmer,” but that language is quickly followed by the adverb “pallidly,” adding an element of illness. Illness leads to a number of unpleasant images (“herring-yellow,” “spotted with a mold,” “dank white lilies,” “empty teats”) for the faces of children, all natural images that have been negatively altered. While Ridge uses similes that compare immigrants to things that are diseased and chaotic, she also testifies to the people’s resilience and beauty; it is not the fault of the immigrants that the landscape is frenzied and deteriorating. Section VIII include a series of similes that eroticize the female body but in so doing celebrates its purity: “breasts that are smooth and cool / as mother-of-pearl” (22) and “the nipples tingle and burn as though little lips plucked at them” (22). At other times, the children of the ghetto are described as “like little potted flowers closed under the stars” (22). Sarah, one of the women who lives above the Sodos family, is described as having a mind that is “hard and brilliant and cutting / like an acetylene torch” (8). Earlier, one of the merchants receives attention for this determination: “His soul is like a rock / that bears a front worn smooth / By the coarse friction of the sea” (14). Arguably, the “friction of the sea” is at once the difficulty of immigrating to the US from across the Atlantic Ocean but also all of the difficulties immigrants face once they reside in the ghetto. Ridge depicts the ghetto as oppressed, dirty, chaotic, and liminal (not quite American but part of America), but none of those qualities are essential to the people or landscape—they’re caused by outside forces who unjustly wield power.

Ridge's similes also match old world with new world to emphasize the struggle of assimilation and to further highlight the inability of these new Americans to gain access to the America that exists outside the ghetto, a version that is guarded by the established and the wealthy. Ridge describes the wares of the peddlers on the street that connect them to "great bazaars," though the goods are also marked by the poverty of the lower class:

But nearer seen

This litter of the East

Takes on a garbled majesty.

The herded stalls

In dissolute array...

The glitter and the jumbled finery

Strangely juxtaposed

Cans, paper, rags

[...]

Flung

Like an ancient tapestry of motley weave

Upon the open wall of this new land (12-13)

The items for sale are made to stand in for the people as well; language such as "garbled" used to modify "majesty" asks that the reader understand that the goods, though worn and perhaps cast off, maintain their core value. The simile pairing the "dissolute array" with "an ancient tapestry" is particularly telling in that the old object is flung upon the

seemingly oxymoronic “open wall” of the new land. Read in terms of the networks Ridge draws in the poem as a whole, the open wall seems an appropriate description of the ghetto. On the surface, arriving in America should bring opportunity and interaction with a rich, new culture (“open”), but the isolation and degradation of the ghetto is a wall on which immigrants are flung, through which they cannot pass. Though Ridge is concerned almost entirely by the social problems facing the Jewish immigrants, she refuses to let readers separate immigrant life and culture from the environmental injustices that shape so much of their American experience.

### **Conclusion**

Ridge’s critique is not of the immigrants or the ghetto itself—“The Ghetto” is a critique of the structural violence that manifests in the unfair and unsafe living conditions on the Lower East Side. Ultimately, however, the solution Ridge suggests in the end of the poem is not particularly satisfying—pointing not to the fact that continued violence inflicted on people and environment will result in an unsustainable future but rather to the history of resilience, particularly as it is associated with the Jewish culture.

Ridge requires a good deal from the Lower East Side residents in the poem, as no reference is made to improving the living conditions. Rather the residents must embrace the world as it is and continue on:

And Hester Street,  
Like a forlorn woman over-born,  
By many babies at her teats,  
Turns on her trampled bed to meet the day. (24)

The descriptors of this passage from the poem's final section have negative connotations: "forlorn," "over-born," and "trampled." These three words are indicative of the types of violence inflicted on residents of the ghetto, a violence that is not readily seen as violence. In the end, however, Hester Street personified as a mother does "meet the day"—life continues on and despite injustice, these immigrants must and do trudge onward. The sense of chaos and confusion that repeats throughout the poem cannot be undone by the final section's urge towards life, one of perseverance and perhaps even hope, nor is that the poem's intent. The images of deterioration and overcrowding are not eliminated from the final section, but rather they occur in opposition to the repeated call towards "LIFE!"—engendering a feeling that the injustices and difficulties will continue just as much as the immigrants must continue to combat them by enduring. The final two lines of the poem describe the ghetto's "strong flux of life" as occurring "Out of the bloody stills of the world... / Out of the Passion eternal" (26). Positioned as though the strength of the people is derived from the hardships they've faced in the ghetto and their faith and determination, Ridge concludes on tones of continuance ("eternal"), violence ("bloody"), and ubiquity ("the world"). Thus, until the structural violence of the ghetto is registered as violence, the option left to the immigrants is to persevere in the "*bartering, changing, extorting, / Dreaming, debating, aspiring, / Astounding, indestructible / Life of the Ghetto...*" (26, emphasis in original).

As her life and poetry indicates, Ridge conceived of poetry as a form of activism, of resistance. As one of the first urban American Modernists, Ridge's work expands conceptions of environmental networks, immigrant culture, Americanness, and social practices while also challenging the bounds of the poetic medium in her attempt to bear

witness to complex injustices. Ridge's contributions are the foundations on which the poetry of environmental justice witnessing by later American women are built, and therefore, studying Ridge's poetry makes visible to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience the still often hidden and ignored structural violence of the last century as well as the current one.

## CHAPTER 2

### "ONE COUNTRY MARKED BY ERROR AND AIR": ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

#### WITNESSING IN MURIEL RUKEYSER'S "THE BOOK OF THE DEAD"

“Witnessing means testifying to both something you have seen with your own eyes and something that you cannot see.”

—Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing*

[...] always now the map and X-ray seem  
resemblent pictures of one living breath  
one country marked by error  
and one air.

—Muriel Rukeyser, “The Disease:  
After-Effects”

#### **Introduction**

In 1936, the 22-year-old poet Muriel Rukeyser set out to document a mining tragedy in West Virginia that primarily affected African American miners. Even at this early point in her poetic career, Rukeyser had already shown a profound desire and ability to represent social injustice in her writing and would continue to do so immediately following her trip to West Virginia: in 1932 she covered the Scottsboro trial in Alabama for Vassar’s *Student Review*, and after her trip to West Virginia, she traveled to Barcelona, Spain to cover the People’s Olympics for *Life & Letters Today* and was among the evacuees when the Spanish Civil War broke out. The poems in her 38-page poem sequence, “The Book of the Dead,” originally published in the book *US I*, chronicle what Rukeyser found on her trip to New River Gorge, WV in 1936. Among them, the portrait poem “Absalom,” told from the subject position of a woman whose husband and three sons died from silicosis that was contracted from inhaling silica during unsafe mining practices, features a line that might not ordinarily receive much attention

as it is in the middle of a long stanza in the middle of a long poem: “the whole valley is witness” (85). This seemingly simple line indicates that all of the residents of the valley, not just those from one town, have witnessed the tragedy. Poetically, “the whole valley” is an instance of metonymy where the physical environment stands in for the people, but Rukeyser’s choice to use “the whole valley” as the means of representing the witnesses offers secondary readings. If taken literally, a valley is a geographic description of a depression in the land; the whole valley, then, could indicate the entirety of that depression or the different elements that comprise or reside in that location. In that way, Rukeyser includes multiple species in her description of the witnesses. Reading Rukeyser’s “whole valley” in this way allows for a discussion of the idea that injustice suffered by non-humans could, and possibly should, be considered in bearing witness to tragedy that is interconnected to the environment.

The line from “Absalom” in many ways encapsulates the heart of Rukeyser’s poetic project: to bear witness to the whole valley, both the human and non-human victims of this disaster and to involve her readers, those who share, as she writes in the lines quoted as my second epigraph above, “one country marked by error and one air.” Linguistically, Rukeyser’s positioning of the near-homophones, “error” and “air,” in close proximity destabilizes the first word’s meaning and transfers it to the second. Thus, the linguistic or “poetic transference” mimics the transfer and interconnectedness that Rukeyser witnesses between humans and the environment in the mining disaster. I argue that Rukeyser’s poetics is the means by which she enacts a form of what I term “environmental justice witnessing.” Environmental justice witnessing occurs in “The Book of the Dead” when Rukeyser treats the environment (for Rukeyser, often described



as land, water, and air) as worthy of notice alongside the miners, those typically understood as victims and whose experiences Rukeyser originally set out to document in poetic form. As Rukeyser published “The Book of the Dead” in 1938 and the environmental justice movement in the United States did not begin until the 1980s,<sup>52</sup> Rukeyser connects social injustice with environmental injustice nearly fifty years before literary scholars in the United States began to name, study, and often advocate for victims of environmental racism.<sup>53</sup>

In this chapter, I assert that Rukeyser positions herself as a secondary witness, a witness who through careful research and observation testifies to injustices she does not experience herself, and therefore aligns herself with the tradition of historians, artists, and activists who seek to capture the “seen-felt” experiences of those who are treated unjustly. I emphasize the “seen-felt” experience in the previous sentence as these concepts, recognizing trauma, injustice, victimhood beyond quantifiable fact, are often dismissed by corporate and government powers but are the terms on which Rukeyser’s poetry of environmental witness are based. “The Book of the Dead” asks the reader to feel, see, and understand the unquantifiable experience of trauma, and Rukeyser’s ability to do this as a poet is predicated on her position as a secondary witness. The linguistic

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<sup>52</sup> See Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* for a discussion of the history of environmental criticism in service of predicting future trends in environmental scholarship. Particularly relevant to this essay is Buell’s description of what makes a book like his possible at the beginning of his first chapter titled “The Emergence of Environmental Criticism.” In this opening, Buell illustrates that “if environmental criticism is still an emergent discourse it is one with very ancient roots” (2).

<sup>53</sup> Environmental racism is defined as granting disproportionate access to healthy and safe environments on the basis of race. Environmental justice, the term under which environmental racism falls, now includes other markers associated with oppressed populations: socioeconomic status, gender, and sexuality, for example. See Joni Adamson, *American Indian, Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism*; Buell for further definitions and discussions of environmental racism. Buell cites *The Environmental Justice Reader*, edited by Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, as an example of an environmental justice revisionist text in that the authors revise definitions of environmental racism to include markers of oppression beyond race (Buell 112-120).

and imagistic transference and transformation Rukeyser undertakes are the means through which she captures the interconnectedness of humans to the environment and small communities to larger issues and concerns like systemic injustice.

Not only does the content of “The Book of the Dead” demonstrate the interconnectedness of human and environmental injustice, but this transference and transformation occurs poetically, in the sounds and images of Rukeyser’s words. Material feminist Stacy Alaimo, one of the first scholars to tie “The Book of the Dead” to environmental concerns, features a discussion of the poem sequence in her book *Bodily Natures* in order to demonstrate what she calls “transcorporeality.” For Alaimo, images throughout Rukeyser’s poem sequence, specifically the image of the x-ray showing traces of silica and the map showing human settlements on the environment, demonstrate the transference (“trans-“) between multi-species’ bodies (“-corporeality”). Building on Alaimo’s observation, I demonstrate that Rukeyser captures this process poetically, through repetition, metonymy, homophonic language, and consistently close associations and positioning of human and environmental terms. This serves to capture the interconnectedness of social and environmental injustice in a poetic multi-species ethnography as well as to demonstrate the place of poetry in environmental justice witnessing.

Rukeyser’s work has most often and consistently been categorized as proletarian, leftist, Marxist, or 1930s political poetry.<sup>54</sup> As Tim Dayton details in his study of “The

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<sup>54</sup> See Tim Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead”*; David Kadlec, “X-Ray Testimonials in Muriel Rukeyser”; Robert Shulman, *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered*. Dayton’s book includes discussion of the poem sequence’s initial reception and also argues, employing Marxist theory, that it is representative of a history of labor in which the laborers are granted no power but are the mechanism by which work is accomplished. In his article published in *Modernism/Modernity*,

Book of the Dead,” Rukeyser worked for the International Labor Defense and later the communist party; her body of work repeatedly returns to issues of social injustice with an activist’s point of view and call to action. Scholars, such as Michael Davidson in *Ghostlier Demarcations*, describe the mythic elements of the poem, particularly those connected to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, as emphasizing Rukeyser’s activism in terms of labor practices as well as her response to the aesthetics of rebirth utilized in the poetry of other modernist writers such as TS Eliot.<sup>55</sup> Rukeyser’s aesthetic choices, whether through mythic associations or documentary construction, are most frequently tied to her politics. In his article “Documentary Modernism as Popular Front Poetics: Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘Book of the Dead,’” Michael Thurston convincingly argues that Rukeyser’s documentary style, modernist aesthetics, and “social agenda of witness” are the means by which she garners a wider range of readers and assures the long-term relevance of her work, which is advocating a specific, radical political stance.<sup>56</sup> Though these are accurate descriptions of both “The Book of the Dead” as well as Rukeyser’s larger body of work, with this chapter, I mean to expand how her work is read and show how “The Book of the Dead” can be read for the ways it establishes an eco-poetic legacy. This is to privilege both elements of the term “eco-poetic”: “eco” to emphasize the

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Kadlec connects Rukeyser’s inclusion of X-rays to the historic use of X-ray technology and issues of class that, he argues, are shown as more important than race to the tragedy. Shulman argues that the work of left-leaning writers of the thirties, among them Muriel Rukeyser, was dismissed during the Cold War era but should be reconsidered today based on their aesthetic and cultural value.

<sup>55</sup> See also Leonard Scigaj, “Ecology, Egyptology, and Dialectics in Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘The Book of the Dead’” for a discussion of the connections between the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* and Rukeyser’s environmental engagement.

<sup>56</sup> The political associations between Rukeyser’s project and documentary poetics means that the term “documentary” becomes near synonymous with political poetry, and as Cary Nelson’s scholarship proves, revolutionary or political poetry is often neglected, especially when written by women, because it becomes politically and historically contingent (*Revolutionary Memory* 2-9).

Rukeyser's depiction of environmental concerns and "poetic" in reference to the technical and generic choices she makes in the medium of poetry. To examine "The Book of the Dead" solely as political poetry limits Rukeyser's critique to one of government and industry when her poetic critique challenges the complex systems that manufacture injustice across geographic locations, across time, and across bodies.<sup>57</sup> I argue that an awareness of the relationship between Rukeyser's description of the environment coupled with the ways her poetics address the major tendencies and tenants of documentary reveals that not only does the use of a collage-documentary align her with the political left, but that those socially-engaged leanings extend her concern beyond the human elements of the tragedy.

### **"The Book of the Dead" as Environmental Justice Witnessing**

In 1936, Muriel Rukeyser and photographer Nancy Naumberg traveled to the area of Gauley Bridge-New River Gorge, West Virginia in order to investigate and document the situation that was beginning to garner national attention, at least from interested parties and social activists.<sup>58</sup> The poem sequence that Rukeyser writes in the year thereafter features accounts of and evidence from the Hawk's Nest Tunnel tragedy that occurred from roughly 1930 to 1934. Originally, miners were hired to dig a tunnel through a mountain to divert water from New River at Hawk's Nest to Gauley Bridge. Upon beginning the tunnel, contractors discovered the mountain contained pure silica, a

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<sup>57</sup> Most directly I mean human bodies, but I also mean to indicate a more metaphoric use of the word: bodies of land, governing bodies, and demographic populations, for example.

<sup>58</sup> Sadly, Naumberg's photographs were not published alongside Rukeyser's poems and have since been lost or destroyed.

costly ingredient in the production of steel.<sup>59</sup> Union Carbide & Carbon Co., the corporation profiting from the tunnel project, began mining, but in order to increase the speed with which the silica was removed, dry drilling was employed rather than wet drilling, which was known to be safer.<sup>60</sup> Because of dry drilling and other inadequate safety precautions, miners on the project, nearly 75% of whom were African American, were exposed to high levels of silicon dust that was inhaled and later caused acute silicosis (Goodman 269). This disease was initially misdiagnosed due to racial stereotyping and then went untreated and ignored because of the cover-up initiated by Union Carbide. The victims and their families attempted to receive redress, or even attention, from the corporation through conventional legal and judicial means. Eventually, congressional hearings were held, but the victims received almost no monetary compensation and limited long-term visibility. In the end, the committee recommended legislation that was meant to keep this kind of human and environmental tragedy from occurring again, though by all accounts the legislation was too limited, too delayed and an ineffective means of prevention for the future.

It would be possible, even easy, to produce a factual account of the mining disaster based solely on the information included in Rukeyser's poem sequence. For example, poems such as "Statement: Phillipa Allen" provide background and dates, "The tunnel is part of a huge water-power project / begun, latter part of 1929 / direction: New

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<sup>59</sup> For descriptions of silica's use in steel production, see Jenny Goodman, "'Presumption' and 'Unlearning.'"

<sup>60</sup> See Michael Cherniack, *The Hawk's Nest Incident: America's Worst Industrial Disaster* for a thorough discussion of the events leading up to the mining disaster. In summary, dry drilling was three times faster than wet drilling and therefore less costly for Union Carbide. Dry drilling, however, releases silica particles into the air where they can be inhaled by the miners, even if they are wearing safety equipment, which were not provided to the miners in the Hawk's Nest Incident (18).

Kanawha Power Co” (76). Others, like “Praise of the Committee,” “Arthur Peyton,” and “Absalom,” discuss what caused the disaster and the corporation’s involvement in the injustice: “Almost as soon as work was begun in the tunnel / men began to die among dry drill. No masks” (“Praise” 79) and “O love consumed eaten away the foreman laughed / they wet the drills when the inspectors came” (“Arthur Peyton” 94). The poems repeatedly turn to the effects on the miners in medical terms (as in “The Disease,” “The Doctors,” and “The Disease: After-Effects”): “short breathing, solid scars / even over the ribs, thick on both sides. / Blood vessels shut. Model conglomeration” (“The Disease” 86). Those descriptions are matched with the attempts by the miners and their families to act as primary witnesses, which often occur in the portrait poems such as “Mearl Blankenship,” “Absalom,” “George Robinson: Blues,” and “Arthur Peyton”: “Dear Sir, my name is Mearl Blakenship. / I have Worked for the rhinehart & Dennis Co / ... / & it was so dusty you couldn’t hardly see the lights” (“Mearl Blakenship” 82-3).<sup>61</sup> Other documents, such as excerpts from testimony given at the congressional hearings and a stock report, also dot the poem. Thus, the multi-genre poem documents the tragedy from different perspectives with an emphasis on the quantifiable facts as well as the experiential evidence. The stark difference between the testimony deemed expert and the efforts to bear witness by the miners and their families, then, lies in the way experiential data is treated. Rukeyser’s documentary matches the two, quantifiable evidence with experiential evidence, in order that both receive attention.

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<sup>61</sup> Many of the poems in “Book of the Dead” that rely on the actual accounts from the miners and their families include errors, such as not capitalizing the “r” in proper noun “Rhinehard.” According to Thurston, many of these errors occur in the primary texts Rukeyser collected, but others are assumedly added to achieve her desired effects (67-69); see Thurston, “Documentary Modernism as Popular Front Poetics” for a discussion of the Rukeyser papers and the differences between those documents and the published versions of the poems.

The term “documentary” relies on its connection to film, a burgeoning art form that many modernist writers found fascinating in terms of its relationship to representation. Documentary poetics has received contemporary critical attention as an example for the theorizing of documentary film. In his book *Theorizing Documentary*, film scholar Michael Renov describes the history of documentary, discussing its complicated relationship to science, politics, and desire. Renov articulates four tendencies of documentary form: “(1) to record, reveal, or preserve, (2) to persuade or promote, (3) to analyze or interrogate, (4) to express” (21). Though today most people still associate documentary with film techniques, a general definition allows for different genres to approach recording, persuading, analyzing, and expressing in various ways. Rukeyser consistently meets these criteria of documentary and often in ways that readers can easily connect with traditional documentary aesthetics. At the root of documentary is “document”—to record—and the intent is often to collect various forms documentation and present them in an organized fashion. In the case of “The Book of the Dead,” many of the elements Rukeyser chooses to include are compelling pieces of personal evidence that are based on experiential data. Dayton describes lyric poetry in this way: “The lyric, as it has come to be understood, is oriented toward subjective experience, toward statements of feeling, and renders the internal world of the private self. Thus the monologues of *The Book of the Dead* serve as lyrical intensities amid the necessarily prosaic—though not artless—documentary sections of the poem” (42). The poem sequence defies this generic categorization, however, especially when elements of “prosaic documentary” are written in blues tercets as they are near the end of “The Doctors”:

The man in the white coat is the man on the hill,  
the man with the clean hands is the man with the drill,  
the man who answers 'yes' lies still. (92)

As descriptive and perhaps straightforward as the almost entirely single syllabic, rhymed lines are, the emotion inherent in them belies a “subjective experience.” Rukeyser records the experience from a distance, but that “the man who answers ‘yes’ lies still” has profound emotional implications that defy the tercet’s seemingly objective position. Alternatively, the lyric moments document “subjective experiences,” such as at the end of “The Cornfield” when George Robinson, one of the miners, explains that the miners “want to live as long as they can” in response to the questioner’s earlier question, “Do they seem to be living in fear/ or do they wish to die?” (93-94). The feelings described here are the moments that though reflective of the interior life also “record, promote, interrogate, and express” the injustice from a different vantage point. The documentary poetics of “The Book of the Dead,” particularly in the ways these moments “express” the emotions and feelings that are integrally connected to an objective experience, meet the criteria of documentary.

In the 1930s documentary is also, however, connected to a “specifically leftist” political stance—a derogatory and limiting label that signaled writing as politically focused and therefore intrinsically non-artistic. In her article “‘Presumption’ and ‘Unlearning’: Reading Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘The Book of the Dead’ as a Woman’s American Epic,” Jenny Goodman attempts to complicate the genre of “The Book of the Dead” as documentary, arguing instead that the poem sequence be counted as an “American female epic.” Goodman establishes her argument based on comparisons to



high modernist texts such as TS Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, which both employ a collage technique, mythology, and epic components. In claiming Rukeyser as a writer of epic, Goodman lessens the tie to documentary's political inference by emphasizing modernist poetic techniques; those modernist techniques, however, are also the means through which Rukeyser acts as a witness. The major tenets Renov theorizes about documentary align with modernist aesthetics as well as theories of witnessing that seek to capture both factual accounts as well as lived/felt accounts of trauma.

Cary Nelson discusses "The Book of the Dead," and much of Rukeyser's other work, as witnessing: Rukeyser sets out to voice the pain and suffering that an oppressed population, here the miners, encounters.<sup>62</sup> This general categorization of the poem as witnessing highlights the undeniably activist quality of Rukeyser's project. Rukeyser, however, demonstrates poetic care in the type of witnessing she undertakes; that is, to discuss "The Book of the Dead" as an example of witnessing in general neglects the steps Rukeyser takes to assure that she ethically and empathetically bears witness to a tragedy of which she herself does not have first-hand, experiential knowledge. The poems feature instances of primary witnessing, when those with first-hand knowledge attempt to give testimony about their often tragic and traumatic experiences.<sup>63</sup> In her book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Kelly Oliver theorizes witnessing as the voicing of traumatic events in order to re-empower victims: "Witnessing works to ameliorate the trauma particular to

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<sup>62</sup> See Michele Ware, "Opening the 'Gates': Muriel Rukeyser and the Poetry of Witness" for a discussion of "The Book of the Dead" as an instance of witnessing rather than political poetry.

<sup>63</sup> Other types of witnessing have been theorized but are not the focus of this essay. I am working with the definition of witnessing as a result of and as a response to trauma, a witnessing to degradation or oppression. Religious witnessing, a witnessing of exultation, is outside the purview of this chapter.

othered subjectivity” (7). Thus, witnessing is described as a response to a traumatic experience that is not only distressing on its own merits but also deprives the oppressed of the ability to respond to it.<sup>64</sup> If attempts at primary witnessing are made by victims, the disinterest or willful negligence on the part of the audience can perpetuate, even exacerbate the trauma—Rukeyser demonstrates that this is the case in “The Book of the Dead.”

There are numerous examples of the miners attempting to respond to the injustice they face in “The Book of the Dead,” and among the most noticeable are the letters included in “Mearl Blankenship” and “Arthur Peyton.” The portrait poems in the voices of female characters, “Absalom” and “Juanita Tinsley,” similarly include evidence of trauma that Rukeyser includes as a primary account. For example, in “Juanita Tinsley,” Rukeyser gives voice to a young woman attempting to receive justice through the writing of “slow letters.” The poem begins with mention of the letter writing amongst attending to life’s daily requirements, and ends with the woman’s wish that the “scene of hope’s ahead”:

maybe they’ll rest upon their land,  
and then maybe the happy song, and love,  
a tall boy who was never in the tunnel. (89)

The trajectory links the letter writing, an example of primary witnessing, with the desired result, that the miners will rest and the survivors can create new lives. The requests of the primary witnesses are meager but still often denied. The reader is repeatedly reminded that attempts at finding justice through the means readily available to oppressed

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<sup>64</sup> In the introduction to her book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Kelly Oliver describes the ability of the oppressed to respond to and be listened to as the subject’s “response-ability” (6-7)

populations are futile. The mother whose voice is featured in “Absalom” describes the compensation she receives for the loss of her three sons and her husband:

I hitchhike eighteen miles, they make checks out.

They asked me how I keep the cow on \$2.

I said one week, feed the cow, one week, the children’s flour. (85)

Rukeyser indicates the ineffectual results of primary witnessing to obtain long term justice by illustrating, first, the ways the victims and their families have sought to gain visibility and justice, and second, that those attempts have found little success. While the examples of primary witnessing are ignored, Rukeyser’s secondary witnessing in the form of the poem sequence receives more attention initially as well as over time.

Rukeyser’s project as she conceived of it was a social one: depict the social injustice she had heard about through newspapers and socially engaged groups in which she participated. Because of her intention to understand and represent the human tragedy without further oppressing the victims, Rukeyser carefully constructs her subject position as a secondary witness. “The Road,” the opening poem of the sequence, details the thinking that led Rukeyser to travel to Gauley Bridge and investigate:

These are roads to take when you think of your country

And interested bring down the maps again,

Phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,

Reading the papers with morning inquiry. (73)

By using second person in these opening lines, Rukeyser places the reader in the position of an observer, one who should have at least a passing interest in the situation derived

from the ownership implicit in “your country.” That is, like Rukeyser, the reader must be interested enough to take the proverbial journey to investigate; this at once places Rukeyser and the reader in the subject position of someone unfamiliar with the tragedy that occurred in Gauley Bridge, but the use of the possessive, in the opening lines as well as in the final gesture of the poem (“Here is your road”), indicates that however distanced from this location, time, and experience one may be, the event is shared.

If “The Road” initiates the reader into the journey to and eventually the actual setting of the poem sequence, “West Virginia” describes the history of the area and highlights the water as the main source of conflict: “But it was always the water” (“West Virginia”). These two opening poems provide background that uninformed readers would not have readily available; they do so while providing the factual and historic landscape that the observers have come to see. Although both poems make reference to the reader’s/observer’s possession of the land, however tangential, these poems and those that follow quickly deny this familiarity with repeated references to a camera’s perspective. The lens, connected to the silica through its use as an ingredient in glass, also represents the distance between the poet-speaker and the events.<sup>65</sup> In “Gauley Bridge,” the fourth poem of the sequence, Rukeyser begins,

Camera at the crossing sees the city  
a street of wooden walls and empty windows  
the doors shut handleless in the empty street  
and the deserted Negro standing on the corner. (77)

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<sup>65</sup> See David Kadlec, “X-Ray Testimonials in Muriel Rukeyser” for a discussion of the proliferation of camera imagery in “The Book of the Dead.”

The metonymy of “camera” for the photographer holding the camera emphasizes the distance of the viewer while also describing the place and its inhabitants as emptied out. Rukeyser goes on to use language that emphasizes desertion and isolation: “empty,” “shut,” “handless,” and “deserted.” In the final line of this first stanza a clear race marker appears: the camera/viewer is opposed to the man on the street who is, anticipatorily, “deserted.” Thus, this is at once our, the readers’ country, our tragedy, but we are also made exterior to it. Due to this subject position, we must see through the camera lens what has happened here rather than experiencing it directly. Similarly, Rukeyser positions herself as an outside observer who is constructing a poetic image in the same way a camera creates a particular image of what is photographed. Early on Rukeyser differentiates herself from the residents and victims of the tragedy by drawing attention to the framed and constructed nature of her point of view. She does so in order that she earn the right to speak for the victims as a poet of witness—she investigates, observes, and researches the events in order to ethically and accurately write about both the quantifiable and unquantifiable experiences of this mining tragedy.

What I am emphasizing here is that the ways Rukeyser constructs herself as a secondary witness for the miners and their families are also the means through which she can act as an environmental witness. Just as the miners lack agency within the corporate and governmental power structure, so too do the environmental elements that appear to show signs of scarring and damage at a slower rate than the miners. Attempting to create a theoretical foundation for witnessing, Oliver asks a crucial question about witnessing’s outcomes: “How can we witness and bear witness to oppression, domination, subordination, enslavement, and torture in ways that open up the possibility of a more

humane and ethical future beyond violence?” (18). Current theorists of witnessing focus primarily on human traumas and tragedies; that is, witnessing occurs when human victims of sexual, racial, physical, and psychological trauma voice their knowable (factual) and unknowable (psychological) experiences. I, however, would like to expand Oliver’s question to attend to other effected species: how can we witness and bear witness to oppression, domination, subordination, enslavement, and torture *of the environment* in ways that open up the possibility of a more humane and ethical future beyond violence?<sup>66</sup> That is to say, the environment, too, must be seen as occupying a subject position requiring the response-ability afforded human victims.<sup>67</sup> Though the poetic decisions Rukeyser makes are more likely not driven by a conscious desire to represent the environment’s subject position in a nuanced way, Rukeyser returns to descriptions of the environment and its part in ideas associated with environmental justice and sustainable futures.

Rukeyser, however, does not simplify the trauma that occurs to the environment surrounding Gauley Bridge. Instead, her descriptions of the land, air, and water are a complicated telling of their contradictory power and fragility as well as their necessity and their threat to humans. For example, Rukeyser links the water that the miners are attempting to divert to power—the power of its force, the power it will generate in the

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<sup>66</sup> Adapting Oliver’s statement to serve my purpose here, I maintain her language here. It should be noted that applying “oppression, domination, subordination, enslavement, and torture” to the environment does anthropomorphize its elements, but this language also elevates the trauma that occurs to the landscape to be equally as troubling as the exploitation that is attributed to the human subjects.

<sup>67</sup> The concept of the environment as a subject has a long history especially associated with myth where the earth is seen as and referred to as “Mother Earth.” More recently, this concept has been the subject of United Nations discussions with the document “The Rights of Mother Earth” being presented to the General Assembly in 2010 and repeatedly thereafter in discussions regarding the treatment of environment entities as having rights associated with human beings in systems governing global concerns. See Adamson, “Seeking the Corn Mother: Transnational Indigenous Organizing and Food Sovereignty in Native North American Literature.”

water-power plant, the power of the corporations who run the whole operation—while illustrating the ways human interference alters the natural environment. The water and the men, however, do not possess power themselves but are merely the mechanism through which power is derived. “West Virginia” begins with an image of water: “They saw rivers flow west and hoped again. / Virginia speeding to another sea!” (74). The “they” Rukeyser refers to are the explorers and pioneers who “found Indian fields / [...] found-land / farmland, the planted home, discovered!” The irony in these lines, that the explorers “discovered!” land that had already been farmed, is pointed. The poem operates on stanzas that begin in *media res*, asking the reader to orient to the new stanza much as the explorers, pioneers, and settlers must reorient to new surroundings. The final three stanzas of the poem are separated from what comes before them by a “but” as the first word of the fifth stanza, signaling a shift and the importance of what follows:

But it was always the water

The power flying deep

Green rivers cut the rock

Rapids boiled down,

a scene of power.

Done by the dead.

Discovery learned it.

And the living?

Live country filling west,  
Knotted the glassy rivers;  
Like valleys, opening mines,  
Coming to life. ("West Virginia" 75)

Words such as "cut" and "boiled" are attributed to the actions of the water, and thus, indicate that when misused the water is dangerous. When left alone and to its natural devices, the water is described sensually: "the water running in the sun, / magnificent flower on the mouth, surprise / as lovers who look too long on the desired face" ("Power" 96). It is only when humans, and arguably, the corporations behind them manipulate the water and the mountain that the environment becomes dangerous.<sup>68</sup> The environment and the workers are pawns in the larger corporate game. Therefore, the explorers and the development that follows them are responsible for the dams that "knotted the glassy rivers" and thus harness the water's power and danger. As the later poems in the sequence will more clearly articulate, Rukeyser's tone alters with each use of a heavily repeated word. In this case, then, the versions of "live" in "West Virginia" possess different connotations. The first instance of "living" in the penultimate stanza reorients the reader from the dead of the stanza's first line to the living. The "live" of the final stanza indicates the westward expansion of the population. The third version, "life," echoes the previous line's rhyming "like," and points to a shift in meaning. The final stanza's central semi-colon indicates that the last two lines are alike in thought and connected through the simile construction of the "like," which immediately follows: the creation of dams is like the creation of mines. The areas come to life with labor and

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<sup>68</sup> The poem "Alloy" features lines that point to the land's dormant danger: "The gangster's / stance with his gun smoking and out is not so / vicious as this commercial field, its hill of glass" (95).



development, but corporate actions have negative human and environmental consequences.

Particularly representative of the way Rukeyser links the harnessing of environmental power to negative consequences, for human and non-human entities, are the poems “Power” and “The Dam,” which occupy the central position of “The Book of the Dead.” These poems, especially when viewed as companion poems, illustrate ways that Rukeyser’s poetics enact a form of environmental justice witnessing.<sup>69</sup> “Power,” the first of the two, begins with a long description of the gorge with its mountains and river:

The quick sun brings, exciting mountains warm,  
gay on the landscapers and green designs,  
miracle, yielding the sex up under all the skin,  
until the entire body watches the scene with love,  
sees perfect cliffs ranging until the river  
cuts sheer, mapped far below in delicate track,  
surprise of grace, the water running in the sun (96)

It is not until the fifteenth line of the first stanza that the reader is introduced to “the narrow-waisted towers” of the water power plant. The remainder of the poem describes in great detail the descent into the mine. In the first image of the poem, Rukeyser describes the sunrise: “The quick sun brings, exciting mountain warm, / gay on the landscapers and green designs, / miracle.” The word “gay,” meaning happy, occurs again when Rukeyser

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<sup>69</sup> It is important to note that though Rukeyser is critical of the social and environmental injustice she views in West Virginia as well as the ways that type of negligence and hubris has led to other instances of tragedy over time and throughout the country, she does not critique urbanization or westward expansion entirely. For Rukeyser, it is imperative that the country as a whole is aware of the dangers of unchecked corporate power as well as recognizing the importance of moderation: “Defense is sight; widen the lens and see / standing over the land myths of identity, / new signals, processes” (“The Book of the Dead”).

describes the descent into the mine: “Light laughing on steel, the gay, the tall sun / given away; mottled; snow comes in clouds; / the iron steps go down as roads go down.”

Rukeyser describes the descent as if it were a descent into hell, using the language of “circles” to designate the different levels of the tunnel and the loss of light, heat, and happiness as means of conveying its unpleasantness akin to that of hell’s. Here, the enjambed line break undercuts the happy meaning of the previous line with the negativity of the second and third. The remainder of the poem continues to detail the dismal atmosphere of the tunnels while also emphasizing the peril each miner faces. Where “Power” describes the tunnels as a cage or cell or type of hell, “The Dam” begins with a description of the same feeling but this time for the water that is trapped by the dam. The water “celebrates” as it escapes the dam, indicating its resistance of the control the corporation imposed on it. When “Power” and “The Dam” are viewed together, the water and the people occupy similar subject positions—the miners and the water are treated as commodity producing mechanisms. In both poems, a conflict exists between the workers, conceived of by Rukeyser as the miners and the water, achieving “happiness” and the corporations profiting through the use of human and natural resources.

Rukeyser’s repeated use of the word “mastery” and concepts of control are markers that indicate a relationship to environmental justice witnessing in “The Book of the Dead.” At stake in the bearing of witness in general is the sense of control victims feel by voicing their experiences—in this way, their subjectivity and response-ability are confirmed in the wake of a victimization that rendered them seemingly powerless. In “The Dam” mastery in the poem sequence is attributed to an ambiguous pronoun “they” that is most closely associated with the powers at Union Carbide: “Their hands touched

mastery: / wait for defense, solid across the world. / Mr. Griswold. ‘A corporation is a body without a soul.’ The corporation has mastery of the environment in terms of their ability to alter it. “Mastery” is also attributed to a miner, but only after he has died; in “Absalom” Rukeyser writes,

*I have gained mastery over my heart*

*I have gained mastery over my two hands*

*I have gained mastery over the waters*

*I have gained mastery over the river. (85)*

Part incantation and part declaration, the italicized lines in this poem are in the voice of Shirley, Mrs. Jones’ youngest son. Shirley has “mastered” elements of his own body and the environment only after he has died. The rest of the poem, in the voice of Mrs. Jones, is an attempt to bear witness at the behest of a dying son, and by its end points specifically to the necessity of secondary witnesses to speak for those who have died: “I will be the mouth for my son.” Rukeyser, however, does not limit the necessity of speech for the speechless to human victims.

Rukeyser’s poems complicate today’s theories of witnessing because she often equates human victims with environmental victims, therefore requiring social engagement with the victimization of environmental elements. In the final third of “The Dam,” Rukeyser includes a stock quote for Union Carbide and immediately follows that element with the following lines:

The dam is used when the tunnel is used.

The men and the water are never idle,

have definitions.

This is a perfect fluid, having no age nor hours  
surviving scarless, unaltered, loving rest,  
willing to run forever to find its peace  
in equal seas in currents of still glass. (101-2)

That these lines follow the stock quote is an important contextual detail because it helps establish a change in point of view. Until these lines in “The Dam,” the speaker of the poem has referred to the business men at Union Carbide as “they.” After the stock quote the perspective shifts from a speaker to that of Union Carbide and big business: as if the stock quote initiates the reader into the mind of the people interested in the figures of the stock quote. The first two lines of this passage draw a correlation between the use of the dam and tunnel, and the miners and water as elements of production. Once the relationship between parts is established, however, Rukeyser quickly delineates an important difference between the miners and the water: the mistreatment leaves scars on the men as evidence, but the water, though similarly manipulated, shows few obvious signs of mistreatment or use. Thus, the water is “a perfect fluid” that “changes. It does not die” (102). Whereas workers who contract silicosis and die must be hidden in order to avoid confrontation surrounding their deaths, the water continues on without significant, immediate cause for alarm. Rukeyser implies that Union Carbide views the problem as one of visibility, not one of unjust practices. Further, Union Carbide is shown to be short-sighted, as it believes that power can be derived from water indefinitely. If these lines are written in the voice of the oppressor, then Rukeyser’s stance is one that recognizes the damage such beliefs cause to environmental systems. Taken in its entirety, lines such as “the whole valley is witness” have implications on the recognition of environmental

interconnectedness, of the subject positions of non-human entities in instances of environmental disaster, and of understudied forms of witness. Rukeyser's awareness of environmental balance and the conflict between corporate development and environmental safety and sustainability are evidenced in the way she enacts a form of environmental justice witnessing in the poems of "The Book of the Dead."

For instances of bearing witness, it is paramount that an empathetic listener be present; environmental justice scholars often discuss the problems associated with finding that kind of audience for testifying to environmental injustice. Communication channels are based on what ecocritic Joni Adamson describes as vernacular landscapes, the ways residents speak to each other about the places in which they live, and official landscapes, the ways the dominant power structure recognizes discussion of the environment.<sup>70</sup> This distinction is on display in Rukeyser's "Absalom," where she writes in the voice of a mother whose three sons die from silicosis:

When they took sick, right at the start, I saw a doctor.

I tried to get Dr. Harless to X-ray the boys.

He was the only man I had any confidence in,

The company doctor in the Kopper's mine,

But he would not see Shirley.

Did not know where his money was coming from. (84)

The corporation's concern is economic, not human. The mother in "Absalom" recognizes that justice in the official landscape can only be achieved with scientific

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<sup>70</sup> See Adamson and David Naguib Pellow, "Engaged Scholarship in the Vernacular Landscape." Adamson utilizes the terms "vernacular landscape" and "official landscape," originally coined by John Brinkerhoff Jackson, in order to articulate the necessity of a "middle place" between the two.

evidence (the X-rays), but this scientific evidence isn't enough as the corporation controls the doctors—even meeting the standards of the official landscape through scientific evidence does not bring about justice. Ultimately, the mother recognizes, as the environmental justice movement later discovers as well, the only viable way to gain visibility of the trauma and injustice is through the telling of the stories. The final couplet of “Absalom” speaks to this conclusion: “He shall not be diminished, never; / I shall give a mouth to my son” (85). In order that her son not be forgotten and that his victimization receive attention, she will be the voice that her son has been denied. This, however, becomes further complicated as the mother's voice is also silenced in the official landscape. Rukeyser's answer is to translate the vernacular into art, a form that values a type of witnessing different from that of the official language. Poetry offers a type of recognition that privileges experiential data over the scientific knowledge of corporations and government structures.

In “The Book of the Dead” and other instances of environmental abuse, a lack of visibility and awareness often impede activism. Ecocritic Rob Nixon discusses one aspect of this as slow violence; the violence perpetrated against humans and non-humans is often incremental and only visible after time, especially in instances of environmental injustice. One means of countering this invisibility is to draw attention to the environment through tours of the location that point out the toxicity present there. In “Bearing Witness or Taking Action?: Toxic Tours and Environmental Justice,” ecocritic Giovanna Di Chiro argues for a more tangible means of bringing about recognition of current environmental injustices. Her argument claims that events, such as toxic tours and other types of ecotourism, make visitors more visibly aware of environmental oppression while often

also bringing financial benefits to the community. Di Chiro articulates many of the difficulties associated with the implementation of these projects. One of the main difficulties is in the creation of events that do indeed benefit the community in question rather than tourism agencies or other corporations. While events can be a powerful testament to the original trauma and provide a means of activism, there is a rich poetic tradition that believes poetry of witness is inherently activist. Poetry reaches a wider span of audience than can travel to one particular part of the country, or world, and asks for recognition of trauma that is more viscerally meaningful than visual representation, especially because the trauma itself often defies vision. The construction of “The Book of the Dead” leads the reader through a poetic toxic tour: the series begins with “The Road” and “West Virginia,” which set the reader into a physical space, the mining town, where the tour begins. Just as visitors inhabit the location of the environmental trauma on a toxic tour, readers are directed towards locations important to the disaster (“Gauley Bridge,” “The Cornfield,” “The Dam”) as well as introduced to the disease, the various people associated with the tragedy, and the bureaucracy that blocked justice. The tour-like quality of the poem series helps the reader experience the trauma—in the same way that toxic tours help visitors experience the trauma first-hand, witnessing attempts to voice experiences and feelings that are known in abstract and experiential ways.

### **Environmental Justice Witnessing and Citizen Science**

Mrs. Jones, the speaker in the poem “Absalom,” says, “I first discovered what was killing these men.” By scientific and medical standards, Mrs. Jones’ statement is false—she does not have the training or the equipment to conduct a medical examination

that would tie her sons' deaths and her husband's illness to silicosis. She does, as Rukeyser indicates throughout the poem, possess knowledge of the disease's progression, its effects, and its general causes. That Rukeyser includes "first discovered" in the first line of the poem points to the importance of associating Mrs. Jones with the possession of detailed knowledge. Mrs. Jones bases her "discovery" on experiential data, a type of data that is not deemed legitimate enough, the poem explains, to incite immediate treatment or recognition: "They called it pneumonia at first." The delayed and ultimately minimal response from Union Carbide and the US government become more sinister and unjust in light of the fact that the experiential data collected and disseminated by first-hand observers such as Mrs. Jones is corroborated by scientific evidence that the corporation possessed before drilling even began: Union Carbide proceeded with drill drilling of silica despite the fact that "the dangers of silicosis of the lungs were already well-documented" (Goodman 269). Even with quantifiable data, the attempts at witnessing by the miners and their families were ignored, then dismissed, and finally recognized though minimally addressed.

The instances of primary witnessing that Rukeyser includes in "The Book of the Dead" demonstrate the difficulties the miners face in finding an empathetic audience. Marginalized communities, whether by race, class, religion, or other markers, are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to voicing concerns about their environments. Citizens have long studied and written about the lands with which they interact, but as scientific fact has eclipsed experiential data, the gap between oppressed populations and their oppressors has only grown. "Common folk," more specifically those who observe changes in their environments, lack specialized knowledge, required by the privileged



population as evidence, but retain experiential, generational, and intuitive connections to the land that affect their speech, writing, and understanding. In tension here is a belief, a belief especially prominent among those in positions of power, that quantifiable data is necessary to determine causation.<sup>71</sup> In the twentieth century, many instances of “citizen science,” when concerned or involved community members study their environments, involve citizens bearing witness to environmental injustice. In the introduction to *Citizen Science: A Study of People, Expertise, and Sustainable Development*, Alan Irwin explains the title of his book and the focus of his project in a way that emphasizes the relationship between the public and scientific pursuit:

“Citizen Science” evokes a science which assists the needs and concerns of citizens—as the apologists of science so often claim. At the same time, “Citizen Science” implies a form of science developed and enacted by citizens themselves—and one important strand of this book will deal with the “contextual knowledges” that are generated outside of formal scientific institutions. (xi)

Often, as Rukeyser demonstrates, the ways marginalized populations deliver that knowledge breaks with conventions, resulting in the dismissal of the witnessing as inaccurate not only on the quality of the information presented but on the means of presentation.

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<sup>71</sup> I use the language “those in positions of power” with recognition of its broadness. Instances of injustice stem from unequal power structures that take a myriad of forms. In the case of “The Book of the Dead” and its representation of social and environmental injustice, those in possession of monetary power (Union Carbide) and political power (the US government and the court system from which the miners and their families seek assistance and rectification) unjustly take advantage of a less powerful population (less powerful by virtue of race but also by class and social position).

The focus of much environmental justice literary criticism focuses on the ways first-hand participants speak and write about their environments. In her article “From Environmental Justice Literature to the Literature of Environmental Justice,” ecocritic Julie Sze writes, “Environmental justice is a political movement concerned with public policy issues of environmental racism, as well as cultural movements interested in issues of ideology and representation” (163). Theories of witnessing provide a framework to understand the element of “representation” in Sze’s definition, and adding the environment as a subject worthy of witnessing emphasizes the parallelism, interconnectedness, and equality that must be granted to both human and non-human elements in the pursuit of justice and sustainability. The type of environmental justice witnessing that Rukeyser creates in “The Book of the Dead” treats the environment and the knowledge of multiple species therein in two ways: first, and perhaps most noticeably, the miners witness to the ways the environment is connected to the unsafe mining practices and their own illnesses; and second, Rukeyser witnesses to the ways the environment is manipulated and harmed alongside the miners. That is, Rukeyser’s wider vision as a secondary witness, granted to her by her privileged subject position as an outsider without personal connection to the landscape of West Virginia or the corruption of Union Carbide, allows her to witness for the environment in ways that the miners, understandably consumed by their own stakes in the tragedy, cannot. Both forms of witnessing describe the exploitation of the environment and emphasize that this type of injustice comprises a sustainable future.

The primary accounts Rukeyser includes in “The Book of the Dead” often represent the environment as containing the potential for danger. In “George Robinson: Blues,” Rukeyser captures the voice of Robinson discussing the deaths of miners:

The hill makes breathing slow, slow breathing after you  
row the river,  
and the graveyard’s on the hill, cold in the springtime blow,  
the graveyard’s up on high and the town is down below. (87)

George Robinson connects the miners’ “slow breathing” to the hill—the hill is the actor that causes the “TUNNELITIS” that affects their lungs. Further, even calling the disease tunnelitis reflects that the tunnel, an element of the environment, is at fault for the disease. In his dreams, Mearl Blankenship ascribes the characteristics of the disease from which he suffers to the tunnel: “the tunnel choked / the dark wall coughing dust” (82). These instances refer to the environment as integrally involved in the tragedy—though the tunnel/environment is not at fault for the trauma. Robinson and Blankenship recognize the danger that Union Carbide has created through exploiting environmental elements to harvest the silica; the tunnel is affected in much the same ways as the miners. The social worker depicted in “Statement: Phillipa Allen” describes the scene in language more polished and scientific than the miners. Her statement confirms the ways the environment injured the miners:

The contractors  
knowing pure silica  
30 years’ experience  
must have known danger for every man (76)

The repetition of the verb “know” connects the “silica” (“knowing pure silica”) to the “danger” (“must have known danger”). The silica, an element of the environment represented variously throughout the poem as “mountain” or “hill,” “dust,” “water,” and “glass,” causes the illness (though, of course, the action causing the danger is repeatedly assigned to Union Carbide). These first-hand accounts, examples themselves of environmental justice witnessing, emphasize the role of the miners as the victims of the injustice.

The miners and their families seek justice for the effects of unsafe mining practices on the miners, *the humans*, not for the effects the project has on the environment. The goal of the primary witnessing attempted by the miners and their families is that the miners receive attention and compensation; this represents a human-centric concept of justice based largely on the time-sensitivity that the circumstances of the disease impose on an exploited and oppressed population. The miners and their families don’t have the luxury of time—the miners because of their rapidly declining health and their families because they struggle to subsist day to day. The primary witnesses seek only the most immediate relief from the injustices of the mining tragedy.

Alternatively, Rukeyser’s privileged position as a secondary witness and outside observer has the result of widening the focus to include the environment as well as extending the view to include an awareness of the long-term repercussions. At no point does Rukeyser neglect the blight of the miners in favor of depicting environmental damage, but she also cannot separate the two in terms of this disaster and in the potential for future disasters. The final two stanzas of “Alloy” indicate the dangers inflicted on humans and non-humans in Gauley Bridge:

The roaring flowers of the chimney-stacks  
less poison, at their lips in fire, than this  
dust that is blown from off the field of glass;  
  
blows and will blow, rising over the mills,  
crystallized and beyond the fierce corrosion  
disintegrated angel on these hills. (96)

Writing in rhymed iambic tetrameter, Rukeyser draws attention to her craft in the creation of this poem and therefore establishes a point of view separate from the miners. In this passage, Rukeyser describes the “grass” and “hills” as covered with poison, the dust—thus, the landscape is affected by the poison as well. Rukeyser illustrates that neither the miners nor the environment have agency in the danger they cause: the miners are forced to take unsafe jobs that disrupt the environment because they need money, and the environment becomes an instrument of illness when it is disturbed. Further, Rukeyser extends the concern of this problem from the here and now. The poisonous dust “blows and will blow,” making reference through the future tense to issues of sustainability and long-term repercussions.

The poet is not the only one in the poem sequence to tie this instance of human and environmental injustice to the future; she is, however, the only one who describes a means of ensuring this event receives long-term attention. In “The Bill” the subcommittee points to the necessity of addressing this tragedy because ignoring it increases the likelihood of similar tragedies occurring in the future:

“If by their suffering and death they will have made a future life safer for work beneath the earth, if they will have been able to establish a new and greater regard for human life in industry, their suffering may not have been in vain.” (106, quotation marks in original)

Immediately following this, the speaker interjects saying, “The subcommittee subcommits.” Rukeyser emphasizes that the subcommittee has not done enough in the word play of “subcommittee” and “subcommits,” but she also discounts the ability of the politicians to follow through on their statement and challenges the bill and then monuments as the means of achieving lasting recognition of this injustice. In the final stanza of the poem, Rukeyser writes:

Words on a monument.  
Capitoline thunder. It cannot be enough.  
The origin of storms is not in clouds,  
our lightning strikes when the earth rises,  
spillways free authentic power:  
dead John Brown’s body walking from a tunnel  
to break the armored and concluded mind. (106)

In the first two lines, Rukeyser indicates that what the politicians envision as recompense is not sufficient. She then points to the interactions between humans and the environment when she designates that the lightning is ours—storms don’t originate in clouds because other elements are involved, one of which is humankind. Water possesses “authentic power” and is freed from the dams we create. In these three middle lines of the stanza, the environment, possessor of “authentic power,” is shown as exploited by humankind.

The final two lines of the stanza speak to Rukeyser's solution, which centers on gaining visibility through action and storytelling. John Brown, mentioned in "West Virginia," the second poem, returns to the sequence but instead of being merely a monument is brought back to life through the poem. That is, Rukeyser demonstrates that historical figures such as Brown and the miners cannot "break the armored and concluded mind," humankind's memories, with monuments, but their actions can live on through the creation of art that bears witness to injustice.

Rukeyser provides art, storytelling, and poetry as answers that ensure the long-term recognition of injustice. In the poem "The Book of the Dead," she writes, "Defense is sight: widen the lens" (110). This language points to a wider view, a view she connects to the arts. Photography, like her documentary poetics, renders historic moments in forms that elicit emotion. Visibility is necessary in order to defend against future injustice, whether social or environmental. In this way, poetry's longevity far exceeds court proceedings—even laws meant to protect against future injustice do not and cannot bear witness to the experience of the events that lead to their creation.

### **Poetic Transference**

Ethical secondary witnessing maintains boundaries between the primary witness and the secondary witness; that is, the secondary witness cannot appropriate the trauma or force of the primary witness to relive the traumatic experience.<sup>72</sup> Secondary witnesses' accounts help the primary witness "work through" the experience. Rukeyser's task to

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<sup>72</sup> See Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* for a discussion of how historians act as secondary witnesses, maintaining their own subject positions while attempting to bear witness to the primary witness' experiences and memories.

bear witness to environmental trauma alongside human trauma is further complicated by her attempt to represent that experience poetically. Rukeyser's poems consistently point to the transference between human and environmental elements in New River Gorge, but while shown as interconnected, Rukeyser maintains the separate subject positions of the human and non-human subjects. This is shown poetically as well in the way that Rukeyser draws parallels between human and environmental concerns through "poetic transference," the ways image, language, and sound are utilized in a way that transfers meaning from one poetic element to another.

Much of "The Book of the Dead" is built on the repetition of language, image, and knowledge that transfers across bodies. This poetic construction allows Rukeyser to provide attention to environmental bodies as well as human bodies while engendering each with their own qualities. For example, the poem "Mearl Blankenship" includes a description of the eponymous miner in which his physical attributes match those of the rock while the rock also literally, through the silica, transfers into his body:

He stood against the rock  
Facing the river  
Grey river grey face  
The rock mottled behind him  
Like X-ray plate enlarged  
Diffuse and stony  
His face against the stone.

As previously mentioned, Rukeyser often grants the water (here, the "grey river") the same position as the miners (Blankenship's "grey face"). The transfer in this passage is



literal in terms of an element of the environment appearing within Mearl Blankenship's lungs, but Rukeyser replicates the transfer in the poetic construction of the poem sequence. That is, not only does Rukeyser include imagery that points to the transfers between bodies and human-environmental interconnectedness, but her poetics further demonstrate that belief. Poetic transference occurs here as the repetition of words, such as "face," "grey," "rock," and "stone," unsettles the words' meanings and attributions. The face of the rock transfers to the grey of the miner's face and then transfers yet again to the miner's face against the stone. The two subjects, the rock and the miner, maintain their own separate individual identities, though the repetition and the proximity of that repetition indicate the interconnectedness of the two entities. Poetic transference, mimicking that relationship poetically, is thus a means for Rukeyser to witness for the environment while simultaneously witnessing for the human victims.

Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* features a chapter entitled "Eros and X-rays: Bodies, Class, and 'Environmental Justice'" in which she dedicates a section to the transcorporeality of Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead." Alaimo argues, "Even as Rukeyser includes a panoply of discourse, she struggles to map an ontology in which the body of the work, the river, the silica, the 'natural,' and the industrial environment are simultaneously material and social....Specifically, Rukeyser presents what I call a transcorporeal landscape" (48). Alaimo's definition of transcorporeality points to the inextricable interrelatedness that is at the core of Rukeyser's form. The mutual invasion, the invasion of the land (silica) into the human body and the invasion of humans into the earth through the tunnels, is engendered through a series of overlaying images but also the series of overlaid voices. The stories of the miners and their families appear beside

testimony from congressional hearings, and the land shows up on the X-rays of the miners' silica infiltrated lungs just as human construction is marked on maps: "But planted in our flesh these valleys stand" ("The Book of the Dead"). This interrelatedness is also present in the poem in terms of the description of the land as possessing bodily characteristics: "the tunnel choked / the dark wall coughing dust" ("Mearl Blankenship"). The land is anthropomorphized in a way that makes its symptoms equivalent to those of the disease-riddled miners.<sup>73</sup> When Rukeyser acts as secondary witness to the human victims of the mining disaster, she is, therefore, also acting as witness for the land; her witnessing seeks a more complex outcome, one in which environmental justice is served by the only means still viable: achieve long term visibility for human and non-human entities affected by the tragedy through poetry.

Environments often play substantial roles in the power dynamics that affect social and political landscapes. That is, environments that contain natural resources, silica for example, or the potential for reaping human benefits, in this case the river water diverted and dammed for the creation of power energy, occupy two roles in relation to "power," one literal and one more figurative. These environments are the means through which "power" can be harvested (in this case, through a hydroelectric plant but wind farms serve similar purposes as does the extraction of coal), but those who possess particular environments, in this case Union Carbide owning the land and water that is dammed, gain

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<sup>73</sup> Scholars, especially those specializing in the environmental humanities and animal studies, have been critical of anthropomorphism as this is to apply human characteristics to species that are decidedly different from humans and can at times indicate anthropocentrism. As Lawrence Buell discusses in the glossary of *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, anthropomorphism can be used with positive effect to indicate the importance of environmental concerns as equal to human concerns (134).

political and social power by being able to direct the use of the environment as they see fit. In “Power,” Rukeyser writes,

[The power-plant towers] poise their freight; god’s generosity! give  
their voltage low enough for towns to handle.

The power-house stands skin-white at the transmitters’ side  
over the rapids            the brilliance    the blind foam” (97).

Rukeyser’s choice of the word “power” as the title of one poem as well as her use of the word in multiple other poems reflects both meanings simultaneously: socio-political power is intimately tied to energy. Thus, water and silica are depicted as powerful for those who possess them, but in their natural state disempowered and easily taken advantage of.

A Marxist reading of “The Book of the Dead,” such as the one conducted by Dayton that was discussed previously, connects the injustice of this power structure to labor practices, which is most definitely in the forefront of Rukeyser’s project, but Rukeyser elevates the environmental elements to the same level of the human elements through poetic transference. Therefore, Rukeyser’s call for activism is achieved in terms of social and environmental concerns. The poem “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” operates on poetic transference in order to create parallels between the miners and the landscape, illustrating that both are taken advantage of by Union Carbide. “Face” most readily describes the front of a human head, but the word is also used to indicate the front of environmental elements such as cliffs, here the front of the dam. Including a colon, which grammatically indicates that what follows is a redefinition or reexamining of what comes before, Rukeyser illustrates that the two, the face of the dam and Vivian Jones, are

equivalents. Later in the poem, the environment is again shown as interrelated to the men: “(O the gay wind the clouds the many men)” (79). The poem goes on to explore this connection with the repetition of “o” sounds that perhaps bring to mind the shape of the human mouth or the mouth of a tunnel, but more obviously, Rukeyser applies this sound to the control imposed by the corporation on its workers and on the environmental elements that are similarly under its control. The word “on” begins four stanzas all having to do with the passage of time and the activities that are the regimented job of Vivian Jones: “On the last quarter he pull his heavy collar up.” The high “O” is used to draw attention to elements of the environment (wind, snow, and water). The sound is then echoed in the word “snow,” which glass-like (as in silica) and white, emphasizes that the injustice for the human participants is not necessarily along racial lines (all are made white by snow) but along class-lines.<sup>74</sup> That the snow, linked in sound to the workers’ daily regimens, is an element of the environment further extends the critique of the injustice from that of the workers to that of the landscape. These connections indicate that Rukeyser, though writing to bring awareness to a tragedy she sees as tied to unjust labor practice, cannot disconnect that injustice from the environments in which it is enacted.

“The Book of the Dead,” the title and final poem of the sequence, ends with the tercet: “desire, field, beginning. Name and road, / communication to these many men, / as epilogue, seeds of unending love” (111). This communication and the planting of “seeds of unending love” is only possible if the reader heeds the direction from four stanzas before when Rukeyser directs the reader to “carry abroad the urgent need, the scene, / to photograph and to extend the voice” (110). Paramount to Rukeyser’s project is the

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<sup>74</sup> As mentioned previously, see Kadlec for a discussion of the ways class is more important than race to Rukeyser’s critique of Union Carbide’s unjust labor practices.

bearing of witness, but interestingly that urging is connected to the natural image of planting seeds. The love or empathy necessary to successfully bear witness is in close proximity and therefore enacts a form of poetic transference. The positive natural image illustrates that the future depends on communication, reception of that communication, and a respect for the natural environment.

## **Conclusion**

Rukeyser witnesses for the trauma of the miners and their families, but simultaneously, her writing also develops a definition of witnessing that includes giving testimony about and for the environment. Rukeyser moves beyond simply addressing the unjust practices of an individual mining community in West Virginia because she positions the text as an example of witnessing for environmental trauma and injustice on a much larger scale. In *The Good Natured Feminist*, Carolina Sandilands argues that at the center of democratic struggles is identity held in tension with democracy. For Sandilands, “the exploration of a more flexible, open-ended version of subjectivity” is the way forward for ecofeminists but also for a democratic society. Rukeyser’s later work argues for poetry’s role in a similar endeavor. In 1949, Rukeyser gave a series of public lectures that were published in *The Life of Poetry*; in these lectures, she argues for the necessity of poetry for democracy but, further, for humanity. Ultimately, she questions the value dominant culture places on poetry: “We have the spectacle of a culture that values its poetry driven into captivity and repression by a power-culture that sets no store on this art” (88). Rukeyser’s concerns for American culture still resonate today as scholars continue to debate the validity of documentary poetics. In a 2007 issue of *Poetry*

magazine, George Szirtes writes, “Poetry is useless as evidence. As far as I know, no poem has been used as evidence in court. The truths the poem deals with are not evidentiary truths. . . .They do not lead back to the real life outside the poem: their truths refer to the real life inside the poem.” In contrast, Rob Nixon argues that writer-activists are particularly well situated to act as witnesses to trauma: “Writer-activists can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the sense, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even the physiological life of the human observer” (15). As theories of witnessing attempt to explain, as ecocriticism attempts to relay, and as Rukeyser articulates, the “real life inside the poem” is often the only way to bring about changes in the “real life outside the poem.” For environmental scholars like Sandilands, this real life must include the environment in which it is set: “The move toward an identity for nature is, in context, a deeply democratic one” (88).

In Dominick LaCapra’s work on writing, history, and trauma, he attempts to clarify and expand what theorists such as Hayden White and Roland Barthes have discussed as “middle voice.” LaCapra writes, “The middle voice would require modulations of proximity and distance, empathy and irony with respect to different ‘objects’ of investigation, and it need not be understood as ruling out all forms of objectivity and objectification” (30). This middle voice, which LaCapra goes to great pains to explain in terms of its use in historiography, allows for the voicing of trauma by empathetic non-victims in art. The term “middle” also occurs in the subtitle to Adamson’s first book: *The Middle Place*. Adamson defines the “middle place” as the intersection between culture and nature where people, from different interest groups,

come together to find consensus. Rukeyser was one of the first to understand these links among identity, democracy, the environment, and justice. “The Book of the Dead” asks us as readers to examine the out of balance resource distribution of the Gauley mining tragedy and, through poetry, see that words occupy a middle place where differing groups come together to decide how to use resources in just ways that do not present all the risks to one group and all the benefits to another—rather, risks and benefits are more equally shared and decided in a democratic way. For this to be achieved, however, the voices of local people must be listened to and valued. Rukeyser’s poetic form, one that includes a form of trauma theory’s witnessing and ecocriticism’s ethnographic research, becomes the middle text that merges environment (“middle place”) with humanity (“middle voice”). Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead,” thus, demonstrates art as activism, and it is the ability of her work to address the complexity of truths surrounding actual instances of injustice and tragedy, experiences that all too often go unnoticed in courtrooms and political arenas, that makes this work a lasting example of secondary witnessing to human and non-human injustice.

## CHAPTER 3

### "IN THE MIDST OF HELLS AND GRUEL": THE SLOW VIOLENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL EXCLUSION AND INTERNAL RACISM IN GWENDOLYN BROOKS' "IN THE MECCA"

“Now the way of the Mecca was on this wise”  
—Gwendolyn Brooks, “In the Mecca”

“I want to propose a more radical notion of displacement, one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable.”

—Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*

#### **Introduction**

In 1967, Gwendolyn Brooks attended the Fisk University Writer’s Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. There she interacted with poets who used writing to further the African American agenda, writers who would later be associated with the Black Arts Movement. Although Brooks had written from a perspective interested in depicting everyday black life from the beginning of her career and her work aligned with the basic beliefs of the Black Arts Movement before the movement even existed, Fisk marked an important moment in Brooks’ career. The next year she would publish *In the Mecca*, a project she began in 1954 (Clarke 28); both the work itself and the fact that Brooks would only publish with black presses from 1969 onward (and, in fact, founded Brooks Press to further the African American aesthetic) signal shifts in how Brooks sees poetry in relation to race, class, and power.



The first section of *In the Mecca* consists of a long poem with the same title.<sup>75</sup> The protagonist of this poem is Mrs. Sallie Smith, an African American woman who works for a white family and lives with her children in the Mecca Building, the poetic iteration of the actual tenement building that existed on the South Side of Chicago from 1892 to 1952.<sup>76</sup> The poem's driving event is the kidnapping of Mrs. Sallie's daughter, Pepita, who the reader finds out in the poem's final stanzas has been raped and killed by another Mecca resident. Brooks includes a series of portraits that depict details of kitchenette living that are often ignored by outsiders, especially those of other races and other socioeconomic classes; these descriptions of life in the Mecca highlight the various ways violence and fear can affect people forced to live in deteriorating, cramped, and often unsafe quarters.<sup>77</sup> Through the portraits, Brooks questions the interactions among African Americans, often indicating that racism and violence from inside the community is as common and dangerous as that from outside. Internalized racism, however, is repeatedly connected to the inability of the African American community to function in an environment that they do not possess and that they cannot readily fix.

Much as the residents are described as decayed and failing, so too is the building itself. The Mecca features prominently in the poem's portraiture and plot line, especially in its sickness and the residents' desire but inability to counter that sickness. The poem's building is based on Mecca Flats, a luxury apartment building for wealthy white

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<sup>75</sup> The second section of *In the Mecca* is titled "After the Mecca" and continues with the themes Brooks develops in "In the Mecca": poverty, community, African American voice, power, and injustice. The second section is comprised mainly of portrait poems and vignettes of urban African American life.

<sup>76</sup> See John Bartlow Martin, "The Strangest Place in Chicago" for a specific discussion of the Mecca in 1950 before the building was razed.

<sup>77</sup> Tenement housing of this sort were often referred to as kitchenette buildings: apartments that have been subdivided so that multiple families can occupy one apartment, each space only a room or two. Brooks' poem "kitchenette building" describes life in this cramped housing.

Chicagoans built in 1891; the building was demolished in 1952 to make way for the Illinois Institute of Technological campus and buildings designed by Mies Van der Rohe.<sup>78</sup> Between the two dates, the neighborhood surrounding The Mecca had changed drastically and with it the clientele for housing. The influx of African Americans moving from the rural South to urban areas in both the South and the North between 1910 and 1970, referred to as the Great Migration, had major effects on changing the landscape of Chicago. Thus, situating “In the Mecca” in a real building, in a real city, in an era undergoing significant social and environmental change, Brooks does more than represent historical fact. Through poetry she transforms the subject matter into a form of witnessing both for the human and environmental elements of the South Side of Chicago. Thus, Brooks marshals poetry towards witnessing, awareness, and, if Brooks’ own actions are any indication, a form of social engagement and activism.

In this chapter, I argue that in the poem “In the Mecca” Gwendolyn Brooks enacts a form of environmental justice witnessing that is heavily invested in the concept of time as it applies to issues of environmental decay, disease, violence, and exclusion. The injustice to which Brooks witnesses has immediate forms that are easily recognizable as unjust but also has forms that are caused by and inflicted as gradual, systemic violence. This second type of injustice, which ecocritic Rob Nixon terms acts of “slow violence,” is slow not only in the scope of months or years but is shown by Brooks to be generational. That is, Brooks bears witness to injustices that stretch across the entirety of the Great Migration’s sixty years. Much like immigrants to the United States from other countries, these African American migrants moving to the urban North often faced difficulties

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<sup>78</sup> Brooks references Van der Rohe in the first lines of the poem: “Sit where the light corrupts your face. / Mies Van der Rohe retires from grace. / And the fair fables fall” (407).

acclimating and assimilating to new locations and cultures; these difficulties were further compounded by the fact that the neighborhoods these new, subaltern populations were relegated to were those abandoned by wealthier, white predecessors.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, immigrants and migrants alike do not find a blank slate on which to found new lives but rather a discarded, deteriorating landscape that perpetuates the legacy of segregation. Brooks' characters are the descendants of this generation; they inherit the landscape further dilapidated and the community further isolated. "In the Mecca" thus reflects the often devastating circumstances of the generations that follow migration, those who are born in the new location but based on the structural violence and lack of access to outside opportunities suffer especially slow and debilitating injustices.

"In the Mecca" features environmental racism in a number of ways, the combination of which results in her portrayal of "internalized racism."<sup>80</sup> Brooks reveals the violence inherent in repeatedly denying access to safe, healthy, functioning environments to entire generations, classes, and races. By environmental access I mean access to physical spaces such as housing, places of work, and locations of leisure but also access to the community "spaces" and interactions that enable full participation in any given physical location. Brooks shows that environmental access is at best compromised and more often entirely denied in the tenement housing on Chicago's South

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<sup>79</sup> See Chapter 1 of this dissertation for a discussion of the difficulties Jewish immigrants to New York City faced in occupying tenement housing on the Lower East Side.

"Wealthier, white populations" is accurate to describe the previous inhabitants of Mecca Flats, but less accurate to reflect the differences between immigrants from Europe to the United States. The housing immigrants to Ridge's Ghetto inhabited previously housed wealthier, often protestant populations. The issue at stake is a minority population—whether based on race, religion, class, or gender—being mistreated by the dominant population.

<sup>80</sup> See Introduction and Chapter 1 of this dissertation for more thorough definitions of environmental racism.

Side; the types and severity of restriction are tied to race and class privilege as well as the length of time spent in unhealthy, unsafe environments. Thus, the African American population is excluded from white neighborhoods (even as they work in white households), denied appropriate and clean environments in black neighborhoods, and further lack the connections between community and environment that would breed better possible futures. “In the Mecca,” thus, captures not the deterioration of an urban space but rather the ways in which deterioration and exclusion result in palpable violence to the African American community. The consequence of environmental racism by outside forces is that African Americans, individually and collectively, lack the time, energy, and means to productively fight the injustice and solve the problems of their environment.

The other opposing force to the remedy of this injustice is the lack of visibility associated with both slow violence and internalized racism. As Nixon indicates in his award-winning *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, slow violence is not readily understood as violent because it is incremental and subtle, though the long-term consequences are often extreme, and therefore, this type of violence is often ignored or further hidden. In order to register the environmental racism of the South Side of Chicago as dangerous, Brooks repeatedly depicts the Mecca Building as a character among its human residents, reflecting the necessity of recognizing the mistreatment of the environment along with that of the people. Brooks’ “verse journalism,” her term for the type of poetry she writes, aims to bring about awareness of a way of life but also of the injustices on which and because of which this life and landscape exist (Gilmore 106). Brooks’ poem exposes the deterioration of urban spaces as an act of slow violence, but

she also concludes that the unsafe environment is not the only consequence of environmental racism. Internalized racism occurs in the Mecca largely because the residents are denied the means to effectively oppose the perpetuation of slow violence; they are so consumed by the immediate dangers and difficulties of everyday life that they lack the resources to combat the larger issues and instead attempt to fend for themselves in whatever ways possible. The subject of Brooks' poem, then, is a means of bringing about recognition for the ways environmental racism causes internalized racism with the hope that recognition may eventually bring about change.

In terms of subject matter, especially of her later works, Brooks' characters are often compared to the African American characters in Richard Wright's *Native Son* who occupy much the same urban setting: "*In the Mecca* underscores the continuity of this dystopian consciousness that emerges in the Depression, so powerfully evoked in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, with the dystopian vision of urban deterioration that motivated the Black Arts Movement a generation later" (Lowney 131). This comparison is especially apt geographically as both Wright and Brooks were long term residents of Bronzeville, the African American section of Chicago's South Side. Both writers include direct and unflinching depictions of poverty, inequity, racism, unsafe living conditions, segregation, filth, stagnation, and isolation. Brooks' work, however, differs from Wright's in terms of her recognition that internalized racism and the destruction of African American communities has environmental as well as social causes. A Brooks scholar, Kenny Jackson Williams writes,

From twentieth-century American poetry there are many strains, most notably the compact style of T S. Eliot, the frequent use of the lower-case

for titles in the manner of e. e. cummings, and the racial consciousness of the Harlem Renaissance, especially as found in the work of Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes; but, of perhaps greater importance, [Brooks] seems to be a direct descendant of the urban commitment and attitude of the “Chicago School” of writing. For Brooks, setting goes beyond the Midwest with a focus on Chicago and concentrates on a small neglected corner of the city. Consequently, in the final analysis, she is not a carbon copy of any of the Chicago writers.

Williams points to the particular setting that Brooks describes, one that is far more specific in describing the streets and building of the actual Bronzeville area than Wright’s general description (Schlabach 85). Beyond her geographic specificity, Brooks’ poetry also consistently differs from her male counterparts as she depicts primarily female characters, often mothers, encountering every day obstacles along with experiences of immediate consequence.

Although Brooks’ earlier works also addressed the deterioration of black communities and the impact on female characters, racism both inside and outside of the African American community are less forcefully rendered. She slowly adapted her approach to the themes to match the socio-political milieu with the aim of trying to impact her communities. Brooks published *A Street in Bronzeville* in 1945, which received immediate critical acclaim, and the Pulitzer Prize winning *Annie Allen* followed in 1950. As these dates indicate, Brooks’ career begins at the very end of what most scholars consider the dates for the Harlem Renaissance. Aesthetically speaking, one of the major issues that often surfaces in discussion of Brooks’ early poetry is one that

similarly plagued African American poets during the Harlem Renaissance: traditionally poetry was written for white audiences who possessed the requisite education and time to devote to studying it.<sup>81</sup> For Harlem Renaissance writers this debate about authenticity often meant questions of what is authentically African American, especially to white audiences and white patrons.<sup>82</sup> For some, poetry written in form harkens back to a white tradition, a tradition to which African Americans did not belong, whereas the use of jazz techniques in poetry reflected African rhythms and heritage. Langston Hughes' "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) describes the importance of writing as a black poet, not just a poet.<sup>83</sup> Poetically, the Black Arts poets inherited a great deal of the blues tradition from their predecessors. In *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions*, Kimberly Ruffin writes, "The legacy of Hughes's cultivation of self-awareness and pride... can be seen in the next generation of African American artists to turn to the blues as an aesthetic resource: Black Arts Movement artists and aestheticians of the early 1960s to early 1970s" (142-43). Brooks is frequently described as a

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<sup>81</sup> Though the abolishment of slavery after the Civil War alleviated some constraints on the education of African Americans, white privilege would dominate access to education and employment. See Booker T. Washington and WEB DuBois for varying accounts of the place of education for African Americans leading up to the Harlem Renaissance.

<sup>82</sup> One notable example from the Harlem Renaissance is Jamaican-American Claude McKay whose use of dialect was touted as "authentic": "The relationship that McKay developed with Jekyll early in his career seems paradigmatic of that existing between many 'colonials' and metropolitan elite 'patrons' in which the patron desires the writer to create 'authentic' and 'native' art that differs from metropolitan codes" (Ramesh & Rani 45). McKay also wrote masterful formal poems, among them the sonnet "If We Must Die," that, though not modernist due to their use of received form, are notable as protest poems. Patronage, as with the case with McKay, was standard and necessary for most Harlem Renaissance writers.

Many writers, however, believed patronage affected the artistic freedom writers possessed. Most notably Langston Hughes felt gratitude for his patron Charlotte Mason but also felt his artistic freedom was restrained by her patronage: "Hughes wrote that the blues 'are songs of the black South, particularly the city South.' This definition reflects not only Hughes's preference for the blues of the city, but also his view of himself as a city person or city artist and not the 'primitive' his patron Charlotte Mason wanted him to be" (Tracy 117-8).

<sup>83</sup> A stance Robert Hayden would come down on the opposite side of thirty years later arguing that he wanted to be known not as an African American poet, but an American poet.

descendent of the poets of the Harlem Renaissance or yoked with contemporary Robert Hayden in terms of their use of poetic form. Unlike Brooks, critics do not associate Hayden's work with particularly African American agenda, especially in light of his declaration that he did not want to be considered a "black poet."<sup>84</sup> African American poets who utilized received forms, especially those writing close to mid-century, received much critical acclaim from white audiences as expert artisans. Black Arts practitioners in the 1960s, however, would feel that reliance on traditional forms denied the uniqueness of African American rhythms and experiences while furthering white culture and hegemony.<sup>85</sup> Further, the Black Arts movement solidified Brooks' feelings that her previous poems, that poetry by African Americans in general, did not in themselves do enough to chronicle black oppression.<sup>86</sup>

Scholars often debate the usefulness of segmenting Brooks' career, especially in terms of separating Brooks' award winning work from her less read later work.<sup>87</sup> Any distinction between the two segments of her career does not lie in her subject matter as

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<sup>84</sup> See Derick Smith, "Quarreling in the Movement" for an argument that attempts to reexamine Hayden's position in relationship to the Black Arts Movement. Smith writes, "Hayden's artistic and political dispositions—his rejection of the label 'black poet' and his paradoxically deep engagement with 'black' materials, his commitment to a religiously inflected universalism, his sometimes opaque modernist form—complexly interact with the ideologies and poetry most often associated with the Black Arts movement in a manner that has muted the poet's legacy as it appears in the work of recent literary scholarship" (449-50).

<sup>85</sup> Modernists in general often rejected forms in favor of free verse, though echoes of received forms can often be found in modernist poems. For example, there is a near perfect sonnet in the barroom scene of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. Formal poems would again be in vogue after high modernism at near mid-century with the New Critics and the descendants of the Southern Agrarians, most famously Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell (in his early career). Brooks says in response to a question regarding "literary models": "I don't even admire Pound, but I do like, for instance, Eliot's 'Prufrock' and *The Waste Land*, 'Portrait of a Lady,' and some others of those earlier poems. But nothing of the sort ever entered my mind. When I start writing a poem, I don't think about models or about what anybody else in the world has done" (Stavros 10),

<sup>86</sup> Brooks began a version of what would become *In the Mecca* in 1954.

<sup>87</sup> See Allison Cummings, "Public Subjects: Race and the Critical Reception of Gwendolyn Brooks, Harryette Mullen, and Erica Hunt" for a discussion of the difference in Brooks' poetry after her experiences at Fisk and her work as part of the Black Arts Movement. See Kathryne Lindberg, "Whose Canon? Gwendolyn Brooks: Founder at the Center of the 'Margins'" for an argument based on the idea that Brooks' work does not change significantly after 1967 but continues her focus on race, gender, and class.



Brooks' entire body of work depicts African American poor who live in urban environments. Rather, the major difference is that Brooks' early poems are said to represent African American life, often in portraits, and her later work depicts the same people and locations with the aim to politicize and publicize the injustice inherent in it. Brooks herself describes her career as having three major segments; explaining her position in regards to Hughes' dictate and black poetry in general, Brooks said in a 1979 interview,

[In *Black Poetry Writing* (1975)] I was describing my own three stages of creativity. One, I call my "express myself" stage, because I was writing about anything and everything in my environment just because I wanted to express myself--flailing about. And second, my "integration flavoring" stage when I wrote a lot of poems which I hoped would bring black people and white people and all people together, and they didn't seem to be doing that (laughter) in great numbers at any rate, and a third stage governed by that little credo that some of the Black poets had in the late sixties, "Black poetry is poetry written by blacks, about blacks, and to black," and then, I'm trying very seriously now to create for myself, develop for myself a kind of poem that will be immediately accessible and interesting, immediately interesting, to all manner of blacks, not just college students though they're included too. That kind of poem will feature song, will be songlike, and yet still properly called poetry. (Cape)

Though these distinctions may be unimportant in understanding the legacy of Brooks' poetic output collectively, the major contrast Brooks draws between the early "express

myself' stage and the later two, "integration flavoring" and her later Black Arts poetry, is a belief in what poetry can do. That is, Brooks goes from rendering what she sees to utilizing poetry as a form of awareness and activism.

The best way to explain the difference in Brooks' treatment of themes is to look at an earlier work and contrast her depiction of black culture with the more evolved treatment of the same themes in "In the Mecca." "We Real Cool" published in 1960 as part of the collection *The Bean Eaters* is one of Brooks' most well known and most often anthologized poems; it is also an example of a poem prior to "In the Mecca" that illustrates a stage in her development towards a Black Arts aesthetic where the poem describes a scene more than it is a call to action. The poem reads:

THE POOL PLAYERS. SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We

Left school. We

Lurk late. We

Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We

Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon.

Brooks establishes the poem as portraiture with the epigraph: readers are looking in on a scene of seven pool players as a bar. Formally, the poem relies on enjambment and repetition for its sonic quality. The lines, except the last, end on "We," which begins a new sentence but is broken from the rest of that sentence across the line break. In an

interview with George Stavros, Brooks explained, “The ‘We’—you’re supposed to stop after the ‘We’ and think about [the pool players’] validity, and of course there’s no way for you to tell whether it should be said softly or not, I suppose, but I say it rather softly because I want to represent their basic uncertainty, which they don’t bother to question every day, of course” (9).<sup>88</sup> The poem proper describes the pool players’ behaviors without commenting on them or calling for change in any way; Brooks documents their lifestyle and subtly attributes it to the places in which they spend their time and the type of masculinity those locations breed.<sup>89</sup> The poem’s violence is implied rather than directly treated: “We / Die soon.” Though there is social commentary present in the poem, in that a kind of lifestyle viewed as “cool” can have severe negative consequences, the poem cannot be considered activist as Brooks does not name or depict the societal mechanisms that perpetuate dangerous masculine models. Rather, she documents the effects of such mechanisms on black culture.<sup>90</sup>

*In the Mecca* is the book in which she more explicitly blends description with social critique and a call for awareness. Much of Brooks’ early work employs received

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<sup>88</sup> Brooks describing the pool players in the Stavros interview: “They have no pretensions to any glamour. They are supposedly dropouts, or at least they’re in the poolroom when they should possibly be in school, since they’re probably young enough, or at least those I saw were when I looked in a poolroom. First of all, let me tell you how that’s supposed to be said, because there’s a reason why I set it out as I did. These are people who are essentially saying, ‘Kilroy is here. We are.’” But they’re a little uncertain of the strength of their identity.”

In *Report from Part One*, Brooks wrote, “The WEs in “We Real Cool” are tiny, wispy, weakly argumentative “Kilroy-is-here” announcements. The boys have no accented sense of themselves, yet they are aware of a semi-defined personal importance. Say the “We” softly.”

<sup>89</sup> See Michael Davidson, *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* for a discussion of black masculinity. Readings of this poem vary slightly, as do readings of most poems. The poem can be read as criticism of this lifestyle, but most often it is read as a portrait of the life poor African Americans live in urban environments (61).

<sup>90</sup> Brooks includes a section of “In the Mecca” that harkens back to the “We Real Cool”: “Gang / is health and mange. / Gang / is a bunch of ones and a singlicity” (413). In this passage, Brooks more directly treats the issue of gangs and the inability for gangs to provide a productive type of unity that they purport to provide.

forms and features people and places familiar to her.<sup>91</sup> In it her pursuit of a socially engaged poetry, she does not abandon traditional verse forms—far from it. “In the Mecca” begins with a number of epic conventions; thus, Brooks revises one of poetry’s earliest and most popular forms to replace the white, middle or upper class hero with a poor, maternal, African American heroine. The poem adopts many epic conventions, among them the hero’s (or here, heroine’s) travels, an invocation of a muse (perhaps achieved through the poem’s tribute), beginning in media res, and catalogs of people, objects, and places. Brooks’ epic also incorporates poetic elements associated with the African American tradition; later, she uses repetition in variation in blues triplets: “her eyes say, and My soft antagonist, / her eyes say, and My headlong tax and mote, / her eyes say, and My maniac default” (410). In terms of the poem as artifact, Brooks’ formal attention speaks to her belief that traditional art is just as valuable as street art but, more importantly, that both are able to productively exist in close quarters.

Critics point to an urgency in her later poems, and the later poems, beginning with “In the Mecca,” do depict violence, both slow and explosive, in a manner that questions the passivity of the African American community as well as the larger white population.<sup>92</sup> Scholars read “In the Mecca” as the poetic enactment of Brooks’ announcement of her intention to be a poet of the Black Arts Movement, one who seeks to witness to the oppression of African Americans: ““In the Mecca” is Brooks’ explicit attempt at

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<sup>91</sup> Brooks’ Pulitzer Prize winning *Annie Allen* features a section titled “The Anniad,” referencing “The Aeneid,” that is a black female epic. See D. H. Melhem, *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice* for a discussion of heroism in poetry throughout Brooks’ career. See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* for a discussion of the effects gender has on the reception and canonization of women’s arts.

<sup>92</sup> See Annette Debo, “Signifying Afrika: Gwendolyn Brooks’ Later Poetry” and “Reflecting Violence in the Warpland: Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘Riot’” for discussion of Brooks’ poetry after 1967 and the violence of anger and protest those poems include that her previous work does not.

effecting a change in the African American community through her poetry and in accordance with the new calls of the Black Arts Movement. She presents the Meccans with bitter realism and anger” (Saber 160). Anger, however, is too general a descriptor for the characters Brooks creates—a derivative question in line with this attribution is: At whom or what are the Meccans angry? The answers seem various and complex. In “In the Mecca,” Brooks does question the African American community’s treatment of its members as well as condemning the white community for its oppression and apathy. In this way, anger can be parsed more accurately as resentment, sadness, or despondency. Readers also see hope and love in the fear Mrs. Sallie and her children feel at the loss of Pepita. Similarly, the environment the characters live in is not beyond redemption—many of the problems associated with the Mecca are the product of a lack of money and time. The building and the urban landscape are not inherently problematic, but the social, political, and cultural systems that govern the Mecca’s way of life are shown to be central to much of the injustice.

According to poet and scholar Cheryl Clarke in her book *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*, “Brooks locates her narrator within a transgressive space and creates a ‘speakerly text,’ a stage whereupon many speech acts are performed by the narrator as well as by the many subjects of the narration” (29-30). Brooks writes,

“What can I do?”

But World (a sheep)

wants to be Told.

If you ask a question, you

can’t stop there. You must keep going.

You can't stop there: World will  
waive; will be  
facetious, angry. You can't stop there.  
You have to keep on going. (410-1)

This points to the major difference between the poetry of Brooks' early career and her late career: it is no longer enough to describe unequal and unjust experiences. Embedded within "In the Mecca," these lines point to an activist's point of view that it isn't enough to question why the world is the way the world is, especially when that world is unjust. The use of the second person offers multiple readings. The "you" could be the speaker addressing Mrs. Sallie as the quotations around "What can I do?" indicate that this question is Mrs. Sallie's; the rest of the stanza could be read as the narrator's commentary on this question. The use of the second person could be read as one African American advising another, and therefore, the "you" would be the collective African American community. Brooks harkens to the language often attributed to Harriet Tubman, an Underground Railroad conductor, in regards to black emancipation and reiterates a variation of advice given earlier to African Americans: "If you want a taste of freedom, keep going."<sup>93</sup> In echoing an important figure from the era of slavery, Brooks questions how much progress has been made in the treatment of African Americans from Tubman's time to her own. Alternatively, as is often the case with the use of the second person,

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<sup>93</sup> See Milton Sernett, *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History*. This passage often attributed to Tubman: "If you hear dogs, keep going. If you see the torches in the woods, keep going. If there's shouting after you, keep going. Don't ever stop. Keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going." Historians and biographers debate the attribution of the phrase to Tubman as she was illiterate and no evidence can be pointed to that these are Tubman's words. In the mid-50s and 1960s, coincidentally the time Brooks is working on the project that would become *In the Mecca*, the four line quatrain ("If you are tired, keep going. / If you are scared, keep going. / If you are hungry, keep going. / If you want to taste freedom, keep going.") appears in children's books and other "semifictional accounts" of Tubman's life.

another reading could be Brooks calling for the readers, whoever they may be, to take action rather than abstractly question. The necessity of progress and the action that causes progress is central to all three readings. Brooks' poem operates in the larger world in much the same way as a speech act and is therefore a form of activism. By describing the injustices and bringing them to light, Brooks' words themselves change the situation: making the invisible visible and giving voice to the previously voiceless. Thus, the injustice of environmental racism is no longer invisible, the damaging community relationships no longer ignored.

### **Before the Mecca: The Great Migration and Deteriorated White Luxury**

The book *In the Mecca* begins with the dedication: "To the memory of Langston Hughes; and to James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, and Mike Alexandroff, educators extraordinaire." Thus, before being ushered into the poems proper, the reader is greeted by four major African American male figures, past and present. The descriptor "educators extraordinaire" speaks volumes towards an announcement of Brooks' values and perhaps an intended trajectory for the book: to use writing to educate, to inform, and to bring about activism. Also important to my discussion of "In the Mecca" is Brooks' choice to include Hughes, specifically memorialized, along with her contemporaries Baldwin, Baraka, and Alexandroff. Hughes becomes representative of the African American literary past; Baldwin, Baraka, and Alexandroff represent the literary present; and implicit in the discussion of all four as educators, the students they teach will be the literature's future. Brooks establishes a literary lineage that stretches from the Harlem

Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, but the poems that follow locate that lineage in real places with specific cultural histories.

African American writers of the 1920's, such as Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer, depicted tensions between rural and urban, black and white, and patronage and artistic freedom. In Toomer's *Cane*, in particular, the relationship between the rural South and the urban North is thought to be rendered through the books' sections: the first is rural, the second largely urban, and the third a return to the South from the North.<sup>94</sup> Both Toomer and Hughes are generally considered part of what was at the time called the New Negro Renaissance and is now referred to as the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>95</sup> The concerns of the Harlem Renaissance reflect modernist tenets, among them fragmentation, representations of urban life, and questioning of literary tradition, but racial considerations ultimately trump modernist aesthetics for a generation of African American writers attempting to establish their voices after slavery.<sup>96</sup> The focus on images surrounding the movement from rural South to urban North aligns with the actual mass migration of African Americans that occurred during era. From 1910 to 1970, the opportunity for industrial jobs brought large populations of African Americans from the rural South to the urban South and, in larger numbers, to the urban North in what is known as the Great Migration (Hartigan 29). In fact, the migration of the black

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<sup>94</sup> See Karen Jackson Ford, *Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernity* for a discussion of Toomer's *Cane*.

<sup>95</sup> See Mark Sanders, "American modernism and the New Negro Renaissance" for a foundational description of the people, culture, and study of this form of modernism. The name New Negro Renaissance stems from the term "New Negro" coined by sociologist Alain LeRoy Locke. The period is most often referred to as the Harlem Renaissance as Harlem was a site associated with many artists, writers, and musicians; many scholars admit that this term is lacking as Harlem was by no means the only site of an African American renaissance—Chicago and Washington, D.C. being notable additions.

<sup>96</sup> Depictions of the tensions inherent in the Great Migration speak to current examinations of the global movements of people, animals, toxins, and political dogma that have received scholarly attention in various ecological and non-ecological fields.



population was so dramatic (6.5 million African Americans migrated to urban areas from 1910-1970) that “‘urban’ [...] consequently become a wide spread euphemism for ‘black’” (qtd. in Hartigan 29). Though the date for the end of the Great Migration is generally given as 1970, African Americans living in urban environments had become commonplace much earlier. Segregation and later de facto segregation meant that African American communities largely resided in poorer neighborhoods, often those abandoned by wealthier whites.

Whereas Hughes and the other poets of the Harlem Renaissance describe the population of African Americans that first arrive as part of the Great Migration, Brooks, over the course of her career, depicts those migrants after years of urban life and their descendents who often had lived only amongst those buildings and streets. Brooks’ poetry is forged in the same locations, the same buildings, and to understand the aftermath of the Great Migration it is necessary to understand the discarded landscape that African American migrants inherit.

The Great Migration is not explicitly mentioned in “In the Mecca.” In a poem predicated on a series of interconnected and blurred portraits, however, it is no coincidence that the first image Brooks includes is a portrait—a portrait of the building to which the African American population arrived as part of the Great Migration. The first and longest epigraph of the poem’s four comes from an article written by John Bartlow Martin for *Harper’s* that describes the Mecca in 1950, about a year before the building was demolished:

“...a great gray hulk of brick, four stories high, topped by an ungainly smokestack, ancient and enormous, filling half the block north of Thirty-

fourth Street between State and Dearborn...the Mecca Building...The Mecca Building is U-shaped. The dirt courtyard is littered with newspapers and tin cans, milk cartons and broken glass....Iron fire escapes run up the building's face and ladders reach from them to the roof. There are four main entrances, two on Dearborn and two on State Street. At each is a gray stone threshold and over each is carved 'The Mecca' (The Mecca was constructed as an apartment building in 1891, a splendid palace, a showplace of Chicago....)" (404)

The portrait Martin, a reporter who though at times in the article sympathetic is not African American nor lower class, draws is anything but flattering, but by abbreviating the passage (marked by the obvious use of ellipses throughout the passage) Brooks alters Martin's image in order to reclaim and revise it in her poetry. The first introduction to the Mecca features adjectives such as "gray," "hulk," "ungainly," "ancient," "enormous." If these descriptors weren't enough, the passage Brooks selects features the courtyard's filth as well as the more functional aspects of the building's architecture (ladders, fire escapes, and gray thresholds). Taken in combination with the second epigraph that gives the information that Mecca's 176 apartments house an estimated two thousand or more people, Brooks begins her poem with a distressing image of a building that is overcrowded, deteriorating, and unappealing. The racial make-up of the building's occupants reflect the Great Migration—once luxury apartments for wealthy whites, the aging building now houses an impoverished black population. Including Martin's parenthetical description of the building's past life, Brooks makes it clear that it is not the building itself that is problematic—it is the state of the building that makes it dangerous.

This is further emphasized by the three epigraphs that follow, especially the one from Richard “Peanut” Washington that says, “. . .there’s danger in my neighborhood.” If the danger resides in “the neighborhood,” not the building, then the major concern has to do with how the neighbors interact with each other and the environment. That is, the migrants of the Great Migration arrive to urban areas that often have already been used and discarded by white populations—making the building’s origins incompatible with an oppressed population’s way of life. Further, that population must adapt to different relationships with each other, with the dominant population, and with their environment in a space that by virtue of age and decay makes that adaptation more difficult.

Environmental critics call attention to the various ways humans interact with their environments. Rob Nixon, following ecocritic Joni Adamson, describes “vernacular landscapes,” those relationships to the environment forged organically by communities, in contrast to “official landscapes,” the relationships to the environment imposed on communities by larger forces be they governmental, societal, or political. Nixon writes,

A vernacular landscape is shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations, maps replete with names and routes, maps alive to significant ecological and surface geological features. A vernacular landscape, although neither monolithic nor undisputed, is integral to the socioenvironmental dynamics of community rather than being wholly externalized—treated as out there, as a separate nonrenewable resource. (17)

Vernacular landscapes and official languages occur in rural areas or urban areas. What is at stake for the African American population arriving to urban Chicago is that they arrive

with no functioning relationship to their new landscape. During the Great Migration, there was little in the way of a suitable vernacular landscape. According to historian Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, “Emotional departures from home and the challenges of urban life disoriented many African-American immigrants and tested their adaptive abilities” (37). The mapping of the African American community vernacular landscape had been largely constructed in the rural South; for the large population of African Americans newly migrated, both the Northern vernacular landscape and the official landscape were white. The white landscape, be it the established vernacular or the official, was closed to African Americans based on their race.<sup>97</sup> Even in the North, often thought of as less culpable for the sins of slavery, segregation was enforced through much of the Great Migration.

Over time, however, as early migrants settled into life in urban environments, the type of relationships between African Americans and the urban environment changed; new black vernacular landscapes were forged, but in the shadow of unjust segregation practices, these black vernacular landscapes were and even today remain problematic, particularly because they were based on already discarded landscapes when they began. In this way, Brooks’ long and varied career represents the changes African American writers depict in terms of their migration (a change of place) but also the changes that occur once that new but seriously compromised space has been occupied for a length of time. Thus, “In the Mecca” depicts the aftereffects that result from the lack of healthy, attainable vernacular landscapes for African Americans during the Great Migration and

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<sup>97</sup> Individuals participate in vernacular landscapes and official landscapes to varying degrees. For example, a reclusive hunter in a very rural area may not participate in an official landscape per se but constructs a solitary vernacular landscape in the ways he or she constructs narratives about the environment.

the problems that arise from constructing vernacular landscapes based on interactions with an insufficient, deteriorating, and dangerous environment. For example, an epigraph appears on its own page facing the beginning of the poem: “Now the way of the Mecca was on this wise” (406). This epigraph is of particular interest in its guide-like tone (language such as “now,” “the way,” and “on this wise”), its noticeably colloquial phrasing (“on this wise”), and its description of the building, a physical structure, as a “way” of life (“the way of the Mecca”). The use of the past tense indicates that the Mecca as it was is not any longer, and in that detail the reader is ushered into the mythologizing of a way of life, which is a foundational element of the poem’s construction. That is, Brooks’ poem features African Americans living in The Mecca building who suffer injustices born partially from unjust power structures that limit upward mobility and partially from the unequal practices, especially in regards to housing, that such power structures wield.

### **Mecca Flats, Slow Violence, and Environmental Justice Witnessing**

Brooks did not set out to document or interrogate what she saw as an environmental problem. Rather, she depicts an unjust way of life that she saw as a resident of Chicago’s South Side; the result of her endeavor, however, illustrates clear ties between the environment and its inhabitants. In this way, a social problem (racism and socioeconomic oppression) seems to have led her, as it did all of the poets in this dissertation, to problems concerning the environment. Also, Brooks is not a primary witness to the experiences she describes in “In the Mecca,” and due to her position as a secondary witness, she exists in the liminal space between observer of the vernacular

landscape of the Mecca and participant in it. This affords her a perspective that is instructive to residents of the specific tenement housing she describes as well as black communities more generally.

Secondary witnesses, as defined by Dominick La Capra in his book titled *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, do not experience trauma firsthand but gain the authority to witness to it through research and empathetic listening to the stories of victims.<sup>98</sup> For LaCapra, the goal of a secondary witness is “empathic unsettlement,” an experience of the event that hovers between passivity (in terms of absorbing another’s story) and activity (authentically capturing that story in art). It is important that secondary witnesses not blur the distinction between themselves and an experiential party. Because Brooks interacted with the residents of The Mecca and researched the area and its population in the writing of the poem, she is a secondary witness as well. Though Brooks herself did not live in the Mecca Building nor did she live in tenement housing, she did live on Chicago’s South Side in various kitchenettes in Bronzeville (Schlabach 88). She also worked as a secretary for a “patent medicine purveyor,” which brought her to The Mecca and to other buildings like it (qtd. in Clarke 26). In other words, Brooks establishes the narrator as a capable and ethical secondary witness through her omniscience as well as her empathy, but Brooks herself is a secondary witness by writing a poem that accurately represents injustice in real environments.

Poetically, Brooks maintains the narrator’s subject position as secondary witnesses through the inclusion of a narrative voice, which may or may not be representative of the poet. The narrator in “In the Mecca” is disembodied and omniscient

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<sup>98</sup> Historians and artists are often secondary witnesses as they may not experience the events they include in their work but attempt to accurately represent those events and experiences.

as Brooks utilizes a multiplicity of address; the narrator often uses third person with moments of first person singular and first person plural, and the characters, among them Mrs. Sallie, speak in the second person. Brooks calls particular attention to the narrator's position as an invested observer just after Mrs. Sallie recognizes that Pepita is missing. First, the narrator describes Mrs. Sallie as "our Woman," engaging the reader through the use of the possessive in Mrs. Sallie's plight. Then, the narrator declares her own investment: "My heart beings to race / I fear the end of Peace." When Mrs. Sallie or any other character speaks, Brooks uses quotation marks to indicate the switch of voice; immediately following a description of Mrs. Sallie as "our Woman," this use of first person points to the narrator's feelings. In this way, Brooks establishes the narrator as an empathetic secondary witness—the trauma is Pepita and Mrs. Sallie's, but the narrator's fear indicates her position as a sympathetic observer, removed but engaged, and therefore capable of acting as a secondary witness by LaCapra's standards.

The position Brooks adopts for herself and for her narrator has proven difficult for scholars to articulate. In order to discuss the observer of the Mecca, critic Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega describes Brooks as a black flâneuse.<sup>99</sup> In her article "The Black Flâneuse: Gwendolyn Brooks's 'In the Mecca'" Ortega writes, "Because her perspective and poetic voice are defined by her identity as a black woman, the black flâneuse of 'In the Mecca' offers a corrective both to the hegemonic view of the American city

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<sup>99</sup> Flanerie is most commonly associated with Charles Baudelaire and his description of the modern flâneur in Paris: "For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world - impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito." Chapter 1 discusses an article by Nancy Berke in which Lola Ridge is also described as a flâneuse. In both cases, this descriptor denies important class markers that separate both Brooks and Ridge from the sauntering, voyeuristic air of a flâneuse.

presented by white, male poets and to the fear of American cities expressed by black writers” (149). While the designation of flanerier does attend to Brooks’ observation of the city, in this case the decayed part of the city, the term itself is often identified with detached observance, even voyeurism. Much more is at stake for Brooks, who though she did not belong to the exact community she depicts, did believe the systemic problems that lead to injustice in that particular tenement building affected African Americans in all urban environments. Brooks’ observations are not those of a saunterer, an attitude that by virtue of the privilege attached to it diminishes the concern for the impoverished people living in tenement housing. In the introduction to her anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, poet Camille Dungy writes, “For a people who have been classified as entirely separate, as a subspecies or as a possession, the demands of empathy and the repercussions of a lack of empathy are all the more apparent” (xxii). Flanerier emphasizes the viewer’s distance from the objects being observed, but it does so with detachment or worse amusement. In contrast, describing Brooks as a secondary witness emphasizes the concern with which she observes the Mecca residents and the desire that those observations in poetic form affect positive change for the community.

Witnessing, particularly with an emphasis on environmental justice, is an apt term for Brooks’ endeavor as she depicts the residents suffering from various forms of slow violence that have environmental components. In “In the Mecca” Brooks connects racial and socioeconomic oppression to environmental injustice, and in so doing, when she bears witness to the violence inflicted on the African American population in the Mecca Building, she is also witnessing to the degradation of the environment and the necessity



of safe, healthy environments for a sustainable future. Rob Nixon coins slow violence in order address violence, often with an environmental component, that by virtue of its accretive nature goes, first, unnoticed and, then, unopposed because it is not registered as dangerous or unjust.<sup>100</sup> “In the Mecca” features examples of both immediate, readily understood violence as well as slow violence.

Slow violence is seemingly ever present in the poem, but the poem’s most dramatic moment is based on a lost child, an instance of immediate fear over potential violence. The main trajectory of “In the Mecca” follows Mrs. Sallie Smith as she comes home from working for a white family and discovers her daughter Pepita missing. This recognition operates as the main pivot of the poem: “SUDDENLY, COUNTING NOSES, MRS. SALLIE / SEES NO PEPITA. WHERE PEPITA BE?”<sup>101</sup> The immediacy of her recognition and the urgency implied by the capitalization indicate the trauma of the situation. The loss of a child, even momentarily, is traumatic. That the main, explosive moment of the poem occurs mid-way through the poem with detailed portraits of Mrs. Sallie, her children, and other Mecca residents occurring both before and after is a poetic means of rendering the potentially causal relationship between slow violence and immediate violence. Had Brooks begun with the loss of the child, the poem would not articulate that innumerable difficulties that face Mrs. Sallie and the Mecca residents on a daily basis, what Nixon refers to as the “metamorphoses wrought by toxicity, the pursuit of social justice, and their collective relationship to apocalyptic time.” The reader sees, for instance, that Mrs. Sallie suffers for her lack of time, money, and basic necessities far

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<sup>100</sup> See the Introduction of this dissertation for a detailed discussion of Nixon’s book and argument; see Chapter 2 for a brief definition of the term “slow violence.”

<sup>101</sup> The poem begins with an introduction to Mrs. Sallie and proceeds with portraits of Mecca residents.

before she recognizes that her daughter is missing. On the first page of the poem, Brooks playfully calls Mrs. Sallie a partridge while referring to defenses in fractured language: “Our prudent partridge. A fragmentary attar and armed coma. A fugitive attar and a district hymn” (407). Mrs. Sallie is worthy of the reader’s affection, which is marked the possessive as well as the term “partridge” and the alliteration of “plumb partridge.” In contrast, her ability to counter the effects of the “infirm booms and suns” that “die” in the background is “fragmentary”, “armed,” and “fugitive.” The meaning of those words combined with the sound, particularly the repeated “f,” “t,” “c,” and “a” sounds in close succession, indicate that Mrs. Sallie’s can only defend herself with fleeting smells and hymns. Pairing immediate violence (the kidnapping of a child) with slow violence (the daily depravity to which Mrs. Sallie returns home), Brooks shows that elapsed time and collapsed time are intimately tied.

The immediate violence that is indicated in “In the Mecca” is a more palpable symptom of the slow violence that exists for African Americans living in urban areas since the Great Migration. The trauma of this singular event is immense, but Brooks repeatedly reminds the reader that the explosive trauma occurs in a place perpetually traumatized by environmental degradation. The building’s pain is similar to the violence of the kidnapping, though less explosive. Brooks writes, “Trapped in the privacy of his pain, / the worried rat expires / and smashed in the grind of a rapid heel / last night’s roaches lie” (412). Here Brooks uses the extermination of rats and cockroaches to represent the living conditions of African Americans in urban environments. Urban life is not only described as physically and mentally confining (“trapped”) but violent and dangerous (“pain”)—African American residents are reduced to vermin. The painful

compression of this urban living space is opposed to the endurance that is required in instances of socioeconomic and racial oppression. Brooks goes further with her description of life in tenement housing by not only describing pressure and weight but also violence and sickness: “The ground springs up; / hits you with gnarls and rust, /derangement and fever, or blare and clerical treasons” (414). Brooks personifies and even weaponizes (“ground springs up; hits you”) the very ground on which the Mecca residents walk, but the list of what the ground hits the residents with speaks to the various ways slow violence occurs here. “Gnarls and rust” stand in for decay; “derangement and fever” indicate disease and insanity; and “blare and clerical treasons” for racial injustices that have systemic, political implications (segregation, racial profiling, and other oppressive practices). In other words, each of these categories (decay, disease, and structural racism) in combination equate to the slow violence to which Brooks bears witness.

Brooks describes the building’s physical structure as if it suffers alongside the people it houses. Twice elements of the building are described as sick: “sick and influential stair” (407) and “sick kitchen” (410). The Mecca is described by Alfred, the poem’s resident poet, with similar physicality and disorder:

...firm arms surround  
disorders, bruising ruses and small hells,  
small semiheavens: hug barbarous rhetoric  
built of buzz, coma and petite pell-mells” (422).

The language points to injuries and medical conditions: “disorders,” “bruising,” “coma,” and “petite pell-mells.” This passage also includes several mentions of smallness and

enclosure, both of which indicate feelings of capture and claustrophobia. Other descriptors of the building are also negative: “dusty windowsill” (408), “It is bad. It is bad” (410), “In the midst / of hells and gruels and little Halloweens” (414), “martyred halls” (416), “soiled window” (426), “lies in dust and roaches” (433). The consistent spacing of these descriptors throughout the poem further establishes the constant slow violence of the living situation. Interspersed with descriptions of residents’ thoughts, beliefs, and stories, the building’s inadequacy is always present but rarely made urgent in the moment. One of the major instances consistently studied in terms of environmental racism is minorities’ disproportionate exposure to toxicity, most often by way of the locations in which they live.<sup>102</sup> In “In the Mecca,” Brooks names both toxins (often unhealthy and unclean objects) and their results (often disease, sickness, and decay), and in this way, connects environmental distress to racism. The building itself oppresses the people, but these negative descriptors extend beyond the physical structure—constant lack causes deterioration of physical structure as well as emotional deterioration.

In some ways, these types of slow violence that have recognizable markers, though gradual or incremental, are easier to identify than the violence that occurs because of lack and/or denial. Pricilla Wald explained in her Presidential Address at the American Studies Association Conference,

As Fanon and others had observed, violence did not need to be explicit to be experienced as such by those who found “do not enter” written in

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<sup>102</sup> See Giovanna Di Chiro, “Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice” for discussions of environmental injustice disproportionately affecting poor, minority populations. Di Chiro explains, using the example from South Central Los Angeles, that not only are these populations exposed to more environmental toxins and violence than other populations but that because of their urban locations environmental groups often refuse to help.

invisible ink on every door or by those who lived daily with the disproportionate threat of state-sanctioned violence (as was evident in the demographics of prison populations, to take one example) and with the disproportionate lack of access to the goods and services of their economies. (190)

Wald connects a “disproportionate lack of access” with violence, and so too does Brooks; thus, slow violence can also be applied to a type of deterioration that comes from a lack of access. What I define here as “environmental exclusion” is any instance when participation or residency in a certain location is denied to a population based on certain markers, in the case of Brooks’ poem race and class. In other words, the absence or the denial of access to a healthy environment enacts a form of violence against the denied population as they are forced to live in unsafe and often toxic environments.

Environmental exclusion is particularly evidenced in “In the Mecca” by the relationship between Mrs. Sallie and the white family for whom she works. Though Mrs. Sallie interacts with the people and places of the white neighborhood, she is not a part of it. Brooks writes,

Mrs. Sallie  
evokes and loves and loathes a pink-lit image  
of the toy-child. Her Lady’s.  
Her Lady’s pink convulsion, toy-child dances  
in stiff wide pink through Mrs. Sallie. Stiff pink is  
on toy-child’s poverty of cream  
under a shiny tended warp of gold.

What shiny tended gold is an aubade for toy-child's head! Has ribbons  
too!

Ribbons. Not Woolworth cotton comedy,  
not rubber band, not string...

“And that would be my baby be my baby....”

And I would be my lady I my lady....”

This passage emphasizes the vexed relationship African Americans, especially domestic servants, have with whiteness. Brooks emphasizes the often contradictory feelings of African Americans towards white lifestyles through the string of verbs “evokes and loves and loathes.” The quick succession and near rhyme of “loves and loathes” sonically points to their similarity even though their meanings are oppositional. By calling the white child in Mrs. Sallie's care as a “toy-child” and her mother, Mrs. Sallie's employer, as “her Lady,” Brooks insinuates the mythologized and make-believe quality of Mrs. Sallie's view of the white family for whom she works. The description of the ribbon in the little girl's hair is telling of the disparity between the socioeconomic class of the two families. Mrs. Sallie's cannot even dream of the luxury of a real ribbon to wear, let alone “ribbons.” These differences, though seemingly unimportant details, to the standards of living in the two households which Mrs. Sallie inhabits. The doll-like description of the white child conjures images of wealth: “stiff wide pink” in regards to her dress, her skin “a poverty of cream” and the “shiny tended warp of gold” used to describe her hair. Alternatively, the portraits of the girl children in the Mecca are opposed to this description, especially with the things they commonly encounter : “Melodie May likes roaches, / and pities the gray rat.” The colors of the white household (pink, cream, and

gold) contrast starkly with the “gray” of the Mecca. The nursery rhyme quality of this passage about Mrs. Sallie job is accurate in terms of matching the toy-child to elements of childhood, but the sound of this passage also indicates just how far the Mecca and Mrs. Sallie’s home is from that fairy tale world of her employers. Brooks ensures that the reader see that the Mecca residents recognize and mythologize the environments from which they are excluded.

By describing Mrs. Sallie’s workplace and then describing her home, Brooks calls attention to the difference between the two, yes, but more she calls attention to the fact that the denial of safe and healthy environments is not only pitiable but unjust and inhumane. In part of the “Strangest Place in Chicago” article that Brooks does not quote in the epigraph to the poem, John Bartlow Martin writes,

When The Mecca Building was constructed...it catered (almost needless to say) to a white clientele. But after 1900 the Negro migration to Chicago forced the black belt to expand, and by 1912 the Mecca Building was the home of the Negro elite...The building started to deteriorate during the 1917-1918 war. So did the whole neighborhood. Booming war industries pulled thousands of Negroes to Chicago. The luckier ones abandoned the region of 35<sup>th</sup> and State to the poor and the wicked. (93-4)

The Mecca represents an instance of environmental exclusion in that African Americans are excluded from the healthy and desirable environments that whites and wealthier blacks inhabit. Martin indicates the occurrence of de facto segregation with his reference to the “black belt,” segments of the city in which African Americans lived. As the black population surged in urban areas like Chicago, more room was needed to house African

Americans thus pushing into neighborhoods that were previously white. Martin insinuates that privilege is based first on race and then on socioeconomic status. By the 1940s, the version of the Mecca Building that Brooks writes about, only “the poor and the wicked” lived in the Mecca Building, except as the poem indicates there is nothing “wicked” about Mrs. Sallie. Brooks shows the very real restraints on the upward mobility of African Americans were at the heart of what caused many residents to be poor and/or wicked. Whereas earlier poems feature images of the possible results from limitations on upward mobility, *In the Mecca* and particularly the title poem feature the conglomeration of the results as well evidence towards their development both within and without the African American community. In “In the Mecca,” then, Brooks attempt to name environmental exclusion as violence. Once named as such, the trauma of exclusion can be traced over time and eventually remedied; without accounting for the existence of this violence, society risks tacitly condoning these actions in the present as well as the future.

Black exclusion occurs at the hands of a dominant white population who can be violent towards African Americans, but in this case, whites are primarily shown as oppressive through disinterest and neglect. In “In the Mecca,” kidnapping and Pepita’s eventual rape and murder are readily understood as violence, but even this blatant and immediate violence does not register far outside the Smith family. The police, who in white landscapes represent justice, do very little to alleviate the trauma of the situation: “The Law arrives—and does not quickly go / to fetch a Female of the Negro Race” (420-1) and “The Law returns. It trots about the Mecca. / It pounds a dozen doors” (421). The description of The Law’s actions—“Does not quickly go” and “trots”—indicate the low priority the white police place on finding a black child. Their search is contrasted to the



frantic search of Mrs. Sallie and her family that all drop what they are doing to immediately look for Pepita. The official landscape's figures of justice choose to be ineffective in the Mecca, and the apathy of the white police reflects how disparate the urban vernacular landscapes have become over time.

### **Slow Violence and Internalized Racism**

Violence from a racist and oppressive white population is understood as unjust, but in "In the Mecca" Brooks depicts violence—both immediate and slow—*within* the black community. Most obviously, by the end of the poem, Pepita is raped and killed by a neighbor—someone who belongs to the same community and suffers the same injustices as the rest of the Mecca residents. The reason for Pepita's murder is not clear, but the murderer is a black male who powerless in white society potentially commits violence against a still less powerful member of his own race. Other versions of internalized racism within the African American community are also demonstrated in smaller, though no less problematic and violent ways. Brooks shows that environmental decay and danger are at the root of the racism amongst the black community, especially in the exchange between human and non-human that is central to the poetic construction of the poem.

Brooks portrays the apathy with which the Mecca residents respond to the Smith family's distress, but in that description Brooks continuously mentions aspects of the building. For example, once Mrs. Sallie realizes that Pepita is missing, the rest of the poem is comprised of portraits of a number of Mecca residents interspersed amongst descriptions of the building's always as the family's worries and searches. In the

following passage, Brooks describes Pepita's siblings as they knock on neighbors' doors for help and information:

And they are constrained. All are constrained.

And there is no thinking of grapes or gold  
or of any wicked sweetness and they ride  
upon fright and remorse and their stomachs  
are rags or grit.

In twos!

In threes! Knock-knocking down the martyred halls  
at doors behind whose yelling oak or pine

many flowers start, choke, reach up,  
want help, get it, do not get it,  
rally, bloom, or die on the wasting vine. (416-17)

Not only does Brooks personify elements of the building (the “yelling oak or pine” of the doors), but she also uses the metaphor of the vine for the lives of the people in each apartment. As an image, the plant connects to the natural world in ways that most of the poem does not. Standing in for the residents themselves, the flowers have the potential to “rally, bloom, or die,” meaning not all growth is unsuccessful in the Mecca, though the challenges are never far away as Mrs. Sallie's children are described not as possessing “grapes, gold, or wicked sweetness” but dreaming of them as their empty bellies ache. Ultimately, the family does not receive much help from other Meccans and, as previously mentioned, the white policemen do still less. Highlighted in the poem, then, are the

relationships between the people, but also that the relationships between the people of the Mecca are comprised by the building's state.

“In the Mecca” represents an experience associated with place that is marked by migration and the loss of previous landscapes, the inheritance of already abandoned locations, as well as exclusion from the opportunity to access better neighborhoods. At the intersection of all of these challenges lies the necessity of successful interaction between humans and the landscapes they inhabit. As they migrated from rural to urban environments, African Americans had to learn the often unspoken rules of urban living in a place that often acted hostilely towards them. Simultaneously, participation in the white vernacular landscape is repeatedly denied. Consequently, the black vernacular landscape of the Mecca is constructed on a faulty foundation that promises hardship rather than success. The black urban vernacular landscape is, therefore, one characterized by a depravity of societal mobility and a form of environmental oppression that becomes violent as it atrophies. The pressures and stresses associated with these toxic environments breed toxic relationships.

One of the most insidious parts of the environmental racism and slow violence under which the Mecca residents suffer is that because the burdens are so great, they can do very little to combat them. This is an instance of what Nixon calls “now o'clock”:

The environmentally embattled slum dwellers are hell-bent on immediate survival, improvising from day to day, from hour to hour. Their temporal element is “now o'clock,” their lives subject to the fickle tyranny of the eternal today. Yet collectively, the city's environmentally afflicted are bound in complex ways to past and future through the metamorphoses

wrought by toxicity, the pursuit of social justice, and their collective relationship to apocalyptic time. (58)

The element of time that Nixon points to in this passage is one way in which slow violence alters the relationships between human and environment: now o'clock often results from a perpetual state of slow violence. The only recourse "the city's environmentally afflicted" have is to engage in a form of triage taking care of only the worst and most pressing concerns, which makes it difficult to address long-term concerns or issues that involve structural change.

One of the ways Brooks depicts now o'clock time in "In the Mecca" is to show early in the poem that Mrs. Sallie, and by extension the African American women she represents, are unable to change their circumstances, even partially. Brooks writes,

"I want to decorate!" But what is that? A  
Pomade atop a sewage. An offense.  
First comes correctness, then embellishment!  
And music, mode, and mixed philosophy  
May follow fitly on propriety  
To tame the whiskey of our discontent! (410)

Brooks details Mrs. Sallie's desire for better circumstances, and one of the reasons for this is that it humanizes her in ways that focus on her positive traits. Mrs. Sallie is not in the position of living in tenement housing, working long hours, and providing very little for her children because she does not care or because she is not worthy of something better. Witness theorist Kelly Oliver writes, "It is easier to justify domination, oppression, and torture if one's victims are imagined as inferior, less human, or merely objects who

exist to serve subjects” (3). African Americans have long suffered under this type of oppression, and in her poem Brooks brings the violence to light as well as the recognition of the importance of black voices and black stories.

## **Conclusion**

Brooks’ conception of identity includes and often conflates humanity with environment; for example, a violence committed against a building is both directly and indirectly harmful to its inhabitants, and as such, though Brooks would not have seen herself or work as part of any environmental movement, the connections she draws between the two mean that in order to solve one sort of injustice, both must be remedied. “In the Mecca” reveals a growing recognition that slow violence and environmental exclusion have complex and dangerous consequences on communities, especially those made up of minority populations. The poem itself and Brooks’ publication of the book exist as possible antidotes to that exclusion and decay. In keeping with the environmental justice movement’s concept of art as activism—art’s ability to expose injustices in meaningful ways—Brooks envisions poetry as a powerful tool to establish black voices (their concerns, their struggles) in a form that has historically been associated with the talent and skill of white male practitioners. Clarke writes, “Black women, as participants in the U.S. black consciousness movement of the 1960s, deployed poetry as a means to theorize on the state of ‘the race’ and ‘the revolution’; cleared a larger space for black women writers who would, in the 1970s, do the work of radically expanding and redefining the American literary canon with a multitude of discursive, subversive projects that positioned black women as subject” (22-23). *In the Mecca* and its title poem mark a

moment in Brooks' career as well as in the literary landscape when an African American woman writes about an African American woman for an African American audience.

The indication of Pepita's death at the end of the poem is heartbreaking and also speaks to the racial component of the injustice the poem renders: "She never went to kindergarten. / She never learned that black is not beloved" (435). The belief that "black is not beloved" is ingrained in African Americans by the discriminatory actions of whites, but that belief, enforced from without, also becomes engrained in the thinking of African Americans as well. The penultimate stanza of the poem ends, "'I touch'—she said once—'petals of a rose. / A silky feeling through me goes!' / Her mother will try for roses" (433). Brooks depicts Pepita as having the potential to become a poet; the child's response to touching a rose is poetic in its rhyme and images. The rose, a poet's standard image of beauty, invokes other poets, Shakespeare and Stein among them, while also referencing an object from the natural world. The child's tactile sense of the world is the image Brooks provides as the bit of consolation at the end of a brutally violent, tragic, and distressing poem. Because the child has been killed, Brooks bears witness to the tragedy of her death but more she bears witness to the tragedies, the multitude of societal, environmental, and cultural tragedies that accumulated, eventually resulting in the situation that brought it about. Mrs. Sallie will "try for roses" and attempt to break the cycle of environmental racism and slow violence that haunts the Mecca. Brooks, too, utilizes poetry as a means of exposing insipient injustices that changes be made both within and without the African American community that bring about healthier communal and environmental relationships.

## CHAPTER 4

### "REMEMBERING IT ALL WRONG": ARTIFICIAL LANDSCAPES AND THE TRAVELER AS WITNESS IN ELIZABETH BISHOP'S BRAZIL POEMS

It is awful to think I'll probably be regarded as  
some sort of authority on Brazil the rest of my life.  
—Elizabeth Bishop after returning from Brazil

Of course I may be remembering it all wrong  
after, after—how many years?  
—Elizabeth Bishop, "Santarém"

#### **Introduction**

On November 26, 1951, Elizabeth Bishop wrote a letter (one of many) to fellow poet and close friend Robert Lowell from the Merchant Ship *Bowplate* "somewhere off the coast of Brazil":

At present we're approaching Santos, a couple days late because of storms....This is a very small freighter—smaller than yours I think....It's Norwegian, and hired by the Duponts to take an enormous cargo of jeeps, combines, etc. There are 9 passengers; that includes a sad young missionary—"Assemblies of God"—and three little boys. The rest of us are an Uruguayan consul from N.Y., a refined but sea-sick lady, and another lady whom fortunately I like very much, otherwise 17 days would have been a little too much—a 6 ft. ex-police woman who has retired after being head of the Women's Jail in Detroit for 26 yrs. She's about 70; very gentle and polite—tells how she accidentally solved such and such a

murder, in an apologetic way, & confessed she was written up in “True Detective Stories.”

The voyage this letter describes later figures prominently in Bishop’s poem “Arrival at Santos,” where “after eighteen days of suspension” the ship finally arrives in the port city of Santos, Brazil. “Suspension,” as Bishop calls it in the poem, is intimately tied to the poet’s perceptions of foreign travel, environment, culture, and writing. As the travelers arrive in Brazil, both in Bishop’s letters and her poems, the voyage, the ship, and even the first experiences of the port represent liminal space that highlight the borders to and from which the passengers traverse. In emphasizing the distance between the US and Brazil by means of the sea voyage, Bishop draws attention to divergences in nation, environment, and culture that potentially affect the ability of foreigners to act as witnesses to disasters, injustices, traumas, and other significant experiences not their own. Bishop’s depiction of international locales, however, is not simply a matter of dichotomies between locals and foreigners; in fact, Bishop’s poetry about travel specifically questions the binaries she sees as typical in depiction of foreign cultures and environments: us vs. them, foreign vs. domestic, wealthy vs. poor, near vs. far, home vs. away. To this end, Bishop’s poetry illustrates the slippage between these pairings through detailed inquiry into the perceptions and representations of travelers abroad.

The epigraphs with which I have chosen to begin this chapter refer to the difficulties Bishop associates with accurate and ethical representations of these distant locations, but also apparent in Bishop’s statements is her emphasis on the role of memory (whether personal, societal, cultural, historical) in depicting and disseminating foreign environments and cultures in art. At the intersection of Bishop’s concerns, then, are



empathetic observation and ethical representation. “Santarém,” the poem from which the second epigraph is drawn, illustrates the poetic means through which Bishop captures her observations while simultaneously directing the reader’s attention to the constructedness of the verse. For example, the repetition of “after,” which causes an audible stutter, as well as the interruption of the dash pointing to the time-based question are poetic enactments of the fallibility of memory. In addition, the admission that “of course” the speaker could be “remembering it wrong” is a self-conscious indicator that marks the act of artistic creation. Bishop at once celebrates the ways art brings readers to the far corners of the world while worrying about the implications of such representations on the cultures and environments represented.

In this chapter, I argue that the poems about Brazil in Bishop’s books *Questions of Travel* (1965) and *New Poems* (1979) demonstrate concern for how representation creates what I term “artificial landscapes,” landscapes constructed in the abstract by foreigners based on distanced perceptions of cultural, national, and environmental exoticism. These artificial landscapes, while theoretical and often obtained unconsciously, have real consequences in terms of how travelers experience foreign locales, later remember them, and often “capture” them in various forms of representation. Due to Bishop’s depiction of artificial landscapes and the ethical questions surrounding their dissemination, I contend that her poetry also calls into question the abilities of tourists to act as secondary witnesses to the social and environmental injustices of the places they visit. By outlining Bishop’s concern with the representation of foreign people, animals, and environments, I further define the elements necessary for the classification of environmental justice witnessing, among which are

close observation, empathetic awareness, and the portrayal of environment as worthy of the act of bearing witness. Bishop's poetic techniques are the major means through which she demonstrates her concern for the efficacy and justness of travelers bearing witness. That is, Bishop's use of form, parenthetical interruption, and denial of epiphany highlight the position of the traveler as a secondary witness.

I focus specifically on the poems "Arrival at Santos," "Brazil, January 1, 1502," and "Questions of Travel" from the "Brazil" section of *Questions of Travel*, and "Santarém" and "Pink Dog" from *New Poems*. Due to the near fifteen year distance between the publication of *Questions of Travel* and *New Poems*, the comparison of the poems in these respective books illustrates the changes Bishop's relationship to Brazilian culture undergoes as a result of her residence in that country as well as how her poetry represents this development. I trace the differences of perception and recognition by comparing Bishop's initial poem "Arrival at Santos" to her later poem "Santarém," which contain striking similarities in setting, plot, and image. In both poems, the poet develops the vexed relationship between American tourists and exotic locations while questioning cultural capital in terms of place, environmental production, and cultural artistry. It is this last type of capital, the capital of artistic endeavor, that I explore in terms of Bishop's poetic delivery. The weight of artistic capital is also the major difference between "Arrival at Santos" and "Santarém"; the speaker in the second poem cannot sustain the epiphany and closure that the earlier speaker describes. Bishop's poems about Brazil range from detailing a tourist's perceptions to representing the process through which an American observes and eventually adopts elements of a foreign lifestyle. Ultimately, then, elements of time and belonging figure into Bishop's questioning as she attempts to

understand how to ethically portray a culture she observes and participates in but does not call her own.

In the poems discussed here, Bishop creates a speaker who, by recognizing the biases of her subject position, ultimately inhabits the role of a global citizen seeking an understanding of the global commons through a poetic questioning that remains vitally important to current global thinking. “Pink Dog,” set in Rio de Janeiro, specifically points to the ways Brazilian culture and landscape have been altered to encourage outside influences that often deny the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and their environments central to indigenous conceptions and experiences. Bishop shows that Carnival, literally filled with masks, covers over the internal societal problems of Brazil at the same time as the major influx of tourists flattens the polyvocal social, environmental, and traditional relationships within Brazil into a monolithic, commercialized party. Bishop positions the titular pink dog as parallel to Brazilian beggars, both of whose presence threatens the appearances of frivolity associated with Carnival. Thus, the poem explores how the manufacturing of a culture of entertainment obfuscates indigenous culture, endangers environmental elements, and profligates inaccurate depictions of people and place in global contexts. At stake in this poem are issues of cultural tradition transformed for an international consumer culture.

In general, this chapter develops connections between existing scholarship that examines tourism, environment, and representation. In *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory*, editors Chris Rojek and John Urry collect essays that examine what it is to be tourist and how the position of the tourist has shifted as local culture and tourism as an industry blend into an amalgamation of organic, imported, and

constructed place identities.<sup>103</sup> One of the major additions is theorizing poetic representation of foreign environments as a form of secondary witness, which heretofore has not been attempted. In the introduction to their anthology *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, Elizabeth DeLoughry and George B. Handley write, “These texts...suggest that since the environment stands as a nonhuman witness to the violent process of colonialism, an engagement with alterity is a constitutive aspect of postcoloniality. Addressing historical and racial violence is integral to understanding literary representations of geography, particularly because the land is ‘saturated by traumas of conquest’” (8). DeLoughry and Handley indicate that the environment witnesses, by which they mean observes or is present for, human suffering. What DeLoughry and Handley do not address is that the environment itself suffers injustice at the hand of colonialism and its effects while also being subject to injustices today at the hands of tourists and the representations of foreign landscapes in a myriad of depictions. Bishop’s poetry demonstrates an awareness not only of the connections between human and nonhuman oppression in situations of colonialism but also that an awareness of the injustices nonhumans suffer must also be carefully and empathetically witnessed.

There is no indication from Bishop’s letters or poetry that she set out to represent environmental injustice, especially in the nuanced terms that environmental scholars approach the study of landscapes, animals, humans, and the anthropocene today. Bishop did, however, envision and employ poetry as the means of representation for her

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<sup>103</sup> See also Tom Selwyn, *The Tourist Image: Myths and Myth Making in Tourism* and Greg Ringer, *Destinations: Cultural Landscapes of Tourism* for discussions of the role of the tourism industry in constructing, accurately and inaccurately, foreign locations and the scholarly intersections of geography and cultural landscape studies in theorizing local and global identities.

observations regarding travel, place, culture, and the relationships among multiple species that are highlighted in the instances when these entities interact. Poetry critic Stephen Burt writes of Bishop that she “explore[s] the limits of...three kinds of portability [in things, utterances, and persons] and the consequences for selfhood when they fail” (27). Burt’s focus is on the ways poets create or capture versions of their own identities when they travel. He continues that his “three kinds of portability” not only indicate the poet’s culling of important instances for self understanding, but when such culling happens surrounding experiences of travel, these portable items also represent appreciation of foreign culture, people, and landscape. In general, then, Burt conceives of Bishop’s poetics of travel as a mirror for her own identity construction; that is, her poetry about foreign travel is an attempt to negotiate her positioning in a culture that is not her own while engaging with foreign people and places. This reading of Bishop’s work does account for the importance the speaker plays in observing the other Americans she catalogs alongside, say, the Brazilians. Nor does Burt’s reading account for Bishop’s concern for the external environment, in poems such as “Arrival at Santos” or “Santarém,” as separate from the speakers’ own experiences, understanding, and relevance. That is, the influence Bishop has on the poetic creation of the Brazilian environment is equal to, if not greater than, the influence of Brazilian culture on Bishop’s own identity.

Bishop, though she denies her intention to include social issues in her poetry at certain points in her career, repeatedly returns to images of cultural and social

questioning, especially in poems written about foreign locations and cultures.<sup>104</sup> In *Modern Poetry After Modernism*, James Longenbach writes of Bishop's relationship to social engaged poetics: "The stumbling block for Bishop, early and late, was not her values as such but her discomfort—nurtured in the thirties—with the conventions of political poetry. . . . [F]rom the beginning of her career, Bishop was 'more interested in social problems' than, in retrospect, she would allow" (36-7). Bishop's statements on the matter as well as Longenbach's assertion that "the conventions of political poetry" were uncomfortable for Bishop bears further explanation. Marit J. MacArthur writes, "[Bishop] seemed to feel that poetry could be politically engaged without making direct political statements" (409). These discussions of Bishop's poetry rest on the definitions of the words "political" and "social engagement." MacArthur points to Bishop's interviews wherein she says, "before the war—we knew much less" and that Brazil, lacking this tragic but instructive event, "seem totally unaware of recent history" (410). The stigma associated with leftist political leanings during the 30s haunts artistic endeavors long after the era. To be a political poet in the 1930's is to sacrifice art and craft to engage with a political stance or document social injustice in verse form.<sup>105</sup>

Scholars have examined Bishop's poetry for a number of elements that intersect in the crux of my argument: travel, migration, animals, foreign landscapes and cultures, self-discovery, Modernism, and poetic invention. Because Bishop often focuses on

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<sup>104</sup> Unlike contemporaries Muriel Rukeyser and Gwendolyn Brooks, Bishop did not set out to write obviously political or socially engaged poetry. Rukeyser and Brooks not only gave voice to topics such as racial, social, and gender injustice in their poetry, but each saw social engagement and observation as part and parcel to the business of poetry. In an interview, Bishop said, "Politically I considered myself a socialist [in the 1930s], but I disliked 'social conscience' writing" (qtd. in MacArthur 409).

<sup>105</sup> Just as many "members" of movements, the New York School poets for example, resist the restraint that categorization imposes, so too do poets resist the label of "political," and scholars like Cary Nelson attempt to differentiate poets from all encompassing terms while still detailing how "revolutionary poetics" share characteristics beyond their social engagement.

animal imagery, as in poems like “The Armadillo” and “The Moose”; because she depicts the American landscape both urban and rural, both literally and metaphorically, in poems such as “Letter to N.Y.” and “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress”; because her work, over the span of an over fifty year literary career, consistently incorporates representations of geography, travel, and mapping—her books titles alone point to the importance of these themes to her poetic project: *North and South*, *Questions of Travel*, and *Geography III*—Bishop’s poetry was and is a popular subject for ecocritics examining depictions of nature by a mid-century American poet. Thus, environmental criticism examining Bishop’s body of work has mainly consisted of Bishop’s depiction of the natural world with the razor detail she inherits from the likes of Marianne Moore.<sup>106</sup> More recently, scholars like Robert Boschman have studied Bishop’s poetry in terms of a poetic lineage in the United States that ties environmental concerns to cultural heritage and expansion.<sup>107</sup>

Bishop’s work, however, has not been widely explored by ecojustice revisionist scholars, those particularly interested in expanding the conception of environmental injustice, nor has it been studied in terms of that field’s current focus on transnationalism and discrepancies in environmental wealth and power. In the introduction to their collection *American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship*, Joni Adamson and Kimberly Ruffin write, “Diverse forms of global environmentalism have important implications for

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<sup>106</sup> See David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet* and Bonnie Costello, “Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop: Friendship and Influence” for thorough discussions of Moore’s influence on and friendship with Bishop. For a recent discussion of Moore’s work in the general field of environmental criticism see Jennifer Ladino, “Rewriting Nature Tourism in ‘an Age of Violence’: Tactical Collage in Marianne Moore’s ‘An Octopus.’”

<sup>107</sup> See Boschman, *In the Way of Nature*, especially the chapters on Bishop for recent scholarship connecting her poetry to environmental literary criticism especially in terms of Westward expansion in the United States and the role of nature in Bishop’s poetry.

the ways in which we understand the relationships among A[merican] S[tudies], ethnic studies, and ecocriticism and for the ways in which we understand what shared management of local and global ‘commons’ and ‘ecological citizenship and belonging’ might mean for both human and non-human species” (Adamson & Ruffin 4-5). Though Bishop’s poetry predates contemporary conceptions of environmentalism and though she would not have categorized her work as being interested in achieving environmental justice, the poems Bishop wrote about Brazil question the relationships between identity, citizenship, culture, and environment to which Adamson and Ruffin point with their collection. Bishop’s particular interest in the intersections between travel, memory, imagination, culture, environment, and artistry repeatedly lead her to question what “ecological citizenship and belonging” mean for a tourist in any foreign locale but particularly Brazil, one of the world’s most biodiverse nations. Bishop’s poetry, then, needs to be studied in terms of national and cultural migration, but also in terms of the role Americans, as tourists, travelers, foreign residents, and expatriates, play as global citizens. My reading of Bishop’s later travel poems as transposing national concerns of integrated culture and environment onto a broader, transnational geography offers a new reading of Bishop’s poems about Brazil but also an expanded understanding of how writers act as secondary witnesses to global environmental concerns.

### **Ecotourism, Artificial Landscapes, and Artistic Representation**

On her way to Brazil in 1951, Bishop writes to Robert Lowell of her plans to tour South America: “I hope to get around to the west coast—maybe write an article about Punta Arenas or something on the way—and stay in Peru and Ecuador until April or



May, then come back in time to put in an appearance at Bryn Mawr” (225). As she indicates, Bishop intended to travel throughout South America for approximately 9 months, but ultimately spends over 15 years in Brazil with partner Lota de Macedo Soares, making a home together in the inland hill city Pétropolis.<sup>108</sup> Thus, Bishop writes about Brazil as a tourist, as an outside observer, and as someone who, by virtue of living in the country for a significant length of time, sees beyond the projected Brazilian experience to elements of the culture and environment that are often hidden from visitors. Though, as I demonstrate in this section, Bishop’s relationship to Brazil develops over time and her poetic depiction reflects these developments, Bishop is consistently weary of how foreign, as yet unknown places are described.

This chapter focuses on Bishop’s poems about Brazil, a country she first traveled to in 1944 and lived in consistently from 1951 to 1967. She spent large portions of her life traveling, often abroad—the destinations she visited included Canada, Italy, France, Spain, Ireland, North Africa, and Brazil. In fact, not a prolific poet, the majority of the approximately 101 poems she published during her lifetime deal with traveling or the representations of people, places, traditions, and experiences while away from “home.” *Questions of Travel*, for example, is divided into two sections: “Brazil” and “Elsewhere,” where one of Bishop’s most famous poems “First Death in Nova Scotia” appears. Her trips appear as the subject matter for much of her poetry, but the role she envisions for herself as an outside observer, therefore never a permanent resident and participant,

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<sup>108</sup> In early 1967 Soares suffered from arteriosclerosis and then a nervous breakdown; her doctor recommended Bishop leave temporarily, and so she stayed in a friend’s house in New York City. After multiple cables saying she wanted to come, Soares arrived in New York on September 16, 1967, and she committed suicide by swallowing a bottle of sleeping pills that night. After Soares’ death, Bishop established her residence in the United States, only traveling to Brazil on occasion (Giroux xvii-xix).

deeply affects these renderings. Bishop's poems illustrate her consistent doubts about *capturing* foreign people and places in any representational form. I emphasize the word "capture" as it demonstrates the power dynamic between viewer and viewed where the artist, writer, advertiser, or tourist controls the image of a distant place that is then disseminated.<sup>109</sup>

In "The Map," the first poem in her first book *North & South* (1946), Bishop already expresses uncertainty in terms of how environments—i.e., the people, cultures, animals, landscapes, and other elements therein—are created. These final lines follow a detailed description of a map and a series of questions pertaining to the representations of this map and maps in general:

Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?

—What suits the character or the native waters best.

Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.

More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors. (3)

With syntax contorted in order to complete the stanza's rhyme scheme, Bishop denies referents until the end of each line. For example, the pronoun in "Are they assigned" initially seems to point to a referent from above, but this line, like the remaining three that follow, hinges at the center of the line. "They" is the "color" used for each country on a map. Finally, the reader identifies the meaning of line, but Bishop's project is one that asks for this pursuit, this decoding. In this way, her poetry brings to the forefront the writer's role in creation but also the reader's—that is, the reader depends on the writer, or

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<sup>109</sup> For further discussion of dynamic between viewer and object see John Berger's seminal text *Ways of Seeing*.

here map-maker as well, for the information in order to picture a place. Imagining, however abstract and make believe, affects conceptions of place.

On its own a poem about a map seems innocuous enough, but Bishop questions the objectivity of artistic creation and representation. The last question Bishop asks in the poem speaks to the power dynamics of map-making—who selects the colors for each country? The countries themselves, which speaks to human agency in the creation of their own image, or by the mapmaker, which would reflect the power of an outsider to make such a decision? Further, as this poem is about mapping landscapes, the question of “countries” picking their colors points to nationality imposed over the images of environments. In a poem composed of a steady stream of questions, Bishop ends on statements, each of which emphasizes the political neutrality of nature itself as well as acknowledges the difficulties associated with all representation, especially that which includes language. The map-maker’s colors, the tools of the trade, are “more delicate” than the historian’s words—though both can, often do, alter the land, broadly defined, in political, personal, cultural, uninformed manners. Important to note, however, is that Bishop’s differentiation between “historians” and “map-makers” points to hierarchy: the map-makers are more delicate than historians, drawing awareness to the ways language is perhaps more powerful yet more dangerous or easily manipulated.

Inherent in the way Bishop writes about place is an awareness of how representation, particularly with language, affects humans’ connections to the environments they experience as well as those they imagine. As discussed in previous chapters, Joni Adamson and Rob Nixon employ the terms vernacular landscape and official landscape to indicate that populations experience and interact with landscapes

differently. That is, the language people employ to describe environments affects their roles and interactions with the various species within a given environment, particularly important to note is the fact language often mitigates human power dynamics. The terms vernacular and official landscapes emphasize the mutual and reciprocal relationship between landscapes and the humans who interact with them; the terms match a type of human interaction (vernacular/official) with physical spaces (landscapes). Stories, one product of those interactions with the land, often reflect the intimate ties between specific populations and their existence in a place. Additionally, I argue that the stories humans tell affect and alter their own experiences of a particular place as well as the experiences of outsiders whose initial experiences are colored by previous descriptions.

In Bishop's "The Map," the colors attributed to a country on a map affect a map reader's perception of that country, but the question becomes one of authority: which group or person has the power to direct the use of language regarding an environment? A vernacular landscape, the ways a community talks about, represents, or communicates with an environment, is often eroded by an official landscape, a landscape imposed on a community by the government or some other power structure. With Bishop's Brazilian landscapes, however, the vernacular and official landscapes do not include a large and important community: tourists. In terms of "global citizens" or "an ecology of belonging," tourists and visitors clearly interact with the Brazilian landscape in ways that fill the same needs of knowing, observing, and interacting with elements of a foreign environment, but tourists often do not have an uninhibited vantage point nor the time to explore and understand the places they visit. Thus, I posit a third type of landscape to be

added to vernacular and official landscapes, that of the artificial landscape, which affects both local and global citizens.

An artificial landscape, as I'm defining it here, is a landscape created through visual art, writing, marketing materials, news media and the like that transmits images and ideas about a specific location. An artificial landscape shares the characteristics of both an official and vernacular landscape in that it is transmitted through stories, maps, and pictures, much in the same way that natives and citizens construct ways of being in their home towns and countries. Artificial landscapes, however, often operate in more abstract and subtle ways: non-residents participate in artificial landscapes without having tangible interaction with the actual landscape. Bishop writes in "Arrival at Santos,"

And, warehouses,

Some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,

And some tall, uncertain palms. Oh, tourist,

is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,

and a better life, and complete comprehension

of both at last, and immediately

Warehouses, typical of ports and industrial living, greet Bishop instead of the lush landscape she expects based on her perception of the artificial landscape of foreign locales in general and Brazil in particular. The adjectives "feeble" and "uncertain" both point to a sense of dissatisfaction with what the country actually contains versus what the tourist expects. Bishop's speaker includes herself as well the general population of

tourists when she addresses the tourist here. The “immodest demands for a different world” speak to the preconceptions of travel that manifest as an artificial landscape. No matter what awaits travelers, the artificial landscape makes a demand on their expectations, thus altering their reception of the landscape.

Artificial landscapes exist, particularly abroad, because of the presence of what Nixon terms “racialized ecologies of looking,” which he defines as “the interconnected webs of looking and being seen in a context where the idea of the natural predominates” (194). The word “racialized” here indicates the inequality such looking reflects when seer and seen operate in a disproportionate power structure, such as when travelers from the Global North visit a country, like Brazil or the countries Nixon explores in Africa, that have been exoticized. Official and artificial landscapes are deliberately constructed in a way opposed to the organic nature of the vernacular landscape. Because of this artificiality, both the official landscape and the artificial landscape risk inaccuracy, biases, and injustice. In a chapter called “Stranger in the Eco-village: Race, Tourism, and Environmental Time,” Nixon writes,

We need to explore what I call racialized ecologies of looking in relation to environmental amnesia. This environmental dynamic between seeing and not seeing, between remembering and forgetting, is forcefully exemplified by the game reserve. But it has a broader pertinence to the challenges of reconciling environmental justice, political transformation, biodiversity, and touristic expectations that have been shaped by the international marketing of nature. (176)

Nixon discusses what he calls “racialized ecologies of looking” in terms of the game reserve, but the Brazil that Bishop describes is another instance where the act of looking is constitutive of power.<sup>110</sup> Bishop’s “Brazil, January 1, 1502” begins with the epigraph “...embroidered nature...tapestried landscape” from Sir Kenneth Clark’s *Landscape into Art*. The poem goes on to discuss the Portuguese conquistadors and how they must have seen the Brazilian landscape, how that image is translated into art (as in the tapestries), and how perceptions of Brazil (the country, its people, and the environment) are affected by these previous renderings today. This poem, ultimately, points to literal violence that occurred during colonization, but it also insinuates that this violence continues to occur, particularly a violence towards the environment. Bishop writes,

Each [conquistador] out to catch an Indian for himself—  
those maddening little women who kept calling,  
calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)  
and retreating, always retreating, behind it.

The “it” of the poem’s final line refers to “the hanging fabric,” the tapestry, the bower of the Amazon forest. In the voice of the conquistadors, Bishop refers to the native people as “Indians” and the women fleeing from rape as “maddening” and “retreating.” The women’s voices are interchangeable with bird call—equating the people of the Amazon with the animal life and larger environment. Artificial landscapes and Nixon’s “racialized ecologies of looking” can both be seen in Bishop’s poetry about Brazil. The representations of the land and its people from history and from art are the means by

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<sup>110</sup> See Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley’s *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literature of the Environment* for detailed discussions of the various ways colonialism’s legacies still affect environments today. The articles are organized by four major topics: “Cultivating Place,” “Forest Fictions,” “The Lives of (Nonhuman) Animals,” and “Militourism.”

which artificial landscapes are created. Further, the artificial landscape here is constructed out of a racialized ecology of looking, one where the native people and land are observed and constructed in a way that robs them of their own agency and identity.

Importantly, though, Bishop repeatedly points to the fact that this narrative that condones, even encourages, the pillaging of foreign lands has been imbedded into the conquistadors through artistic representations. Bishop writes,

[the Christians] came and found it all,  
not unfamiliar:  
no lovers' walks, no bowers,  
no cherries to be picked, no lute music,  
but corresponding, nevertheless,  
to an old dream of wealth and luxury  
already out of style when they left home—

Named specifically “the Christians” in the poem, the Portuguese conquistadors do not expect to find Eden per se, but they do expect to find a courtly, romanticized version of the Brazilian landscape. The explorers seek an “old dream” as if though the exact figuring changes the elements of power and conquer are always present. In fact, the narrative they seek in Brazil is outdated before they even leave—in this way, Bishop indicates that the dream has less to do with reality or an understanding of other cultures and more to do with myths developed out of their own national and cultural values.

Bishop, however, is not content to limit the effects of unjust narratives to colonialization—she implicates her readers as participating in the perpetuation of these same attitudes. The choice of tense in that last line is important to this end—the women



are “retreating, always retreating.” Though “retreating” is part of the compound verb unit with the word “kept” from two lines above, the distance between that past tense verb and the repetition of “retreating” emphasize that the women’s retreat is perpetual—still happening today. Further, the poem begins with the assertion that tourists’ experience of Brazil is the same as that of the conquistadors. Though time has crawled on, the landscape hasn’t shifted, and this is less because the actual place hasn’t changed and more because current conceptions of the place and tourists’ interactions with it remain tied to archaic and unjust visions.

The history of colonialism in Brazil breeds the creation of an artificial landscape in contemporary times that perpetuates the racialized ecology of looking and denies the ability of witnessing, for neither humans nor the environment, to take place. Therefore, in order to challenge previous representations, Bishop consciously questions what it means to look—the object of tourists’ gaze, of Bishop’s gaze in her early poetry about Brazil, is for markers of the artificial landscape they expect. In “Questions of Travel,” Bishop writes, “Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theaters?” The tourism industry drives current expectations of Brazil with the effect that the country is known primarily for its beaches and for Carnival.<sup>111</sup> In a 2009 article on tourism in Brazil, Mirjam A. F. Ros-Tonen and Anna Flora Werneck describe their research on the existence of a “tourist bubble” in the “small-scale destination” of Alter do Chão in the region of Santarém (a region that appears specifically in Bishop’s poems). Based on definitions and research conducted by previous scholars, Ros-Tonen and Werneck describe a “tourist bubble,” also called an “environmental bubble,” as “the tendency of

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<sup>111</sup> See Elizabeth Neely, “Cadela Carioca” for an article on the major differences between Brazilians’ readings of Bishop’s poems about Brazil and American readings.

tourists to stay among themselves and to be 'physically "in" a foreign place but socially "outside" its culture"' (60). While their study deals with contemporary instances of tourism, the concept of a tourist bubble is instructive, especially in terms of the connections I draw here between Bishop's representations of tourists and the concepts of ecological belonging. The closing line of "Arrival at Santos" is telling of Bishop's recognition of a tourist bubble: "We leave Santos at once; we are driving to the interior." Santos defies the tourist bubble in its every day-ness, but as a port city, a border through which a traveler must cross before entering the actual destination, Santos does not eliminate the possibility of finding the place one expects. Bishop's use of the word "interior" indicates both something hidden and something authentic.

Cultural geographer Tim Cresswell uses the term "non-place" to describe locations that are only used as thoroughfare to another place: airports, train stations, and other places where there is, to quote Gertrude Stein, "no there there."<sup>112</sup> Santos, in Bishop's poem and as representative of most port cities, is in many ways a non-place—it acts as an entrance point to "real" Brazil: "Ports are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap, // but they seldom seem to care what impression they make." Bishop depicts Santos as a non-place, but more concerning for her is that Santos and any other place the tourists visit will be made to conform to the artificial landscapes they expect. The Elizabeth Bishop of "Arrival at Santos" is eager to get to the interior of the country because she seeks "real" Brazil and leaves what she sees as a non-place or as the artificial landscape she assumes, but as Bishop's later poetry about Brazil shows, leaving behind artificial

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<sup>112</sup> See also Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* for the difficulties associated with avoiding value judgments when studying non-places, which though they lack "palatial thickness," do figure largely in the cultures of many cultures' everyday lifestyles (63-71).

landscapes and learning to participate in vernacular landscapes is not as easy as leaving the coast.

### **Dangers of the Tourist as Witness**

In “Arrival at Santos” Bishop writes, “So that’s the flag. I never saw it before. / I somehow never thought of there *being* a flag // but of course there was, all along. And coins, I presume” (lines 15-16). This passage, easily overlooked, points to important concepts associated with Bishop’s depiction of nationality, travel, and tourists. That the speaker does not think of there being a flag at all indicates that she conceptualizes place without citizenship or national identity—flags traditionally mark land as owned or conquered and thus signify nationhood. Further, the image the speaker possesses prior to arriving has been at once exoticized and simplified; the untamed Amazon jungle does not match a land with the organized government the flag represents. The stanza break between “being a flag” and “but of course” revises Bishop’s initial thought and re-imposes nationhood onto the land. Even when the speaker doesn’t recognize nationhood, it still exists. Thus, Bishop establishes that the subject position of a tourist operates with ideas about a landscape prior to actually entering that landscape. In this way, representation by non-residents depends not only on experiences abroad, but the way visitors reconcile their expectations and crafted tourist locations with experiences (that both confirm and deny artificial landscapes) is crucial towards how they understand, interact with, and eventually represent the people, places, and activities they encounter.

The position of the tourist is not, on its surface, dangerous. Bishop describes the flag as “a strange and beautiful rag.” Both “strange” and “rag” have somewhat negative

connotations but are innocuous enough. “Beautiful” is a positive description, though a generic descriptor that applies to a number of objects and vistas, and therefore, similarly hollow. Bishop’s description of the tourists’ reaction to their first encounter with Brazil seems a study of comparisons: beauty (desire) and strangeness (difference). Both qualities, however, are shown to breed danger for the vernacular landscapes of Brazil and the cultural traditions therein. Such reactions by tourists illustrate that they, by virtue of entertainment and curiosity as their purposes of interaction, have a peripheral interaction with the places and people they encounter. As such, their accounts are largely manipulated first by their expectations and second by the artificial culture manufactured for their pleasure. A tourist herself, Bishop is not overly critical of tourism and travel in general, but in her poetry, she illustrates concerns about authenticity in representation, especially when that representation chronicles cultures, traditions, and landscapes that travelers do not understand. By comparing the poem “Arrival at Santos” to “Santarém,” published fourteen years apart, I demonstrate that Bishop is consistently leery of representing foreign travel as a tourist, but as her subject position in relationship to Brazil changes so too does how she writes about the environment, indicating the possibility that an empathetic observer can participate in environmental justice witnessing.

“Arrival at Santos” is the first poem in the “Brazil” section of Bishop’s third book *Questions of Travel* (1965). The main thrust of the poem centers on Bishop’s experience on the steamer boat she took to travel to Brazil and the first port that marked her entry there. In the second stanza, however, she addresses a tourist, a category with which she aligns herself:

Oh, tourist,  
is this how this country is going to answer you  
  
and your immodest demands for a different world,  
and a better life, and complete comprehension  
of both at last, and immediately,  
after eighteen days of suspension?

The direct address of the tourist following the sighing “Oh” immediately indicates a sense of exasperation. That is, the tourist demands too much of travel both in terms of the places she visits as well as the consequences the experiences will have on her own outlook. Also, Bishop points here to tourism as an industry that feeds on place as a commodity to be “immediately” consumed. These requests of Brazil are derived from the preconceived artificial landscape as well as expectations of travel in general. Beginning in media res and written in the present tense, this poem reads as both a running commentary on Bishop’s trip and an anticipatory glance towards what she hopes to find on her impending journey. As such, the speaker has no experience with Brazil, and though sensitive to the limitations of representation, intimates that the interior of the country will offer a truer picture.

Bishop emphasizes the tourists’ attitude of curiosity with a poetic playfulness. Using quatrains with full rhyme in the second and fourth lines, Bishop creates a predictable sound pattern. This pattern is strictly maintained throughout this poem, with one moment of adherence standing out for its playful oddity. The second line of the

stanza about Miss Breen ends with a description of her: “a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall.” Therefore, the fourth line should rhyme with “tall.” Bishop writes,

Her home, when she is at home, is in Glens Fall

s, New York. There. We are settled.

The customs officials will speak English, we hope,  
and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes.

Ports are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap.

Bishop chooses to maintain full rhyme by separating the “s” off of what should be Glens Falls. This separation is further highlighted by having this idiosyncratic break across a stanza break. The reasons for this choice could be numerous. For one, the letter left on its own to begin the line is an “s,” and as the initial image of Miss Breen is being hooked with a boat hook, the “s” visually replicates that hook. The unsettling of the “s” from “Fall” and the city name from its state across the line and stanza break also act in counterweight to the new stanza’s assertions: “There. We are settled.” The direct syntax and short assertions attempt to undo the uncertainty expressed by delaying the completion of Miss Breen’s home address. The travelers deny the uneasiness of their new experiences and attempt to quell their fears. This continues in the stanza as mention is made of items that bring comfort: speaking English, bourbon and cigarettes. Though of seemingly minor importance to the poem’s overall meaning, this line break is typical of Bishop as she manipulates poetic techniques so that form matches content. The feeling of discomfort and separation from one’s own home and usual routine is at the root of Bishop’s questioning, and she attempts to use poetry to make the reader feel a small portion of this

discomfort by denying the reader's expectations—though Bishop maintains the rhyme pattern, she only does so by dismantling a single letter from its word, an unexpected solution, especially when the name of the town can be fictionalized allowing for the substitution of a city whose name rhymes with “tall” without truncating it.

“Santarém” (1979) returns to the image of a tourist's experiences in Brazil, and like “Arrival at Santos,” this poem, too, includes a warning about representation and interpretation:

Even if one were tempted  
To literary interpretations  
Such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female  
—such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off  
in that watery, dazzlingly dialectic.

Here, Bishop cautions against an easy dialectic associated with interpreting individual experiences as well as places, people, and cultures. As the first poems in their respective books, both “Arrival at Santos” and “Santarém” introduce the subject of travel and its representation at the very beginning in order to ensure that the reader proceed carefully. In other words, Bishop gives instructions on how to read the poems that follow: with caution, thought, empathy, and patience.

One of the most striking similarities between “Arrival at Santos” and “Santarém” is the detailed description of another tourist against whom to judge the speaker—this judgment, however, reveals a stark contrast in the positions of the speaker in the two poems: in “Arrival at Santos” Miss Breen and Miss Bishop are both tourists with the same expectations, but in “Santarém” Mr. Swan and Miss Bishop do not share the same

position any longer. The speaker in “Arrival at Santos” acts in the same way as Miss Breen; both characters are shown to possess an attachment to their own culture as evidenced by their reliance on English at the port and their desire to keep their “bourbon and cigarettes.” Whereas the speaker here uses the collective *we*, for herself and Miss Breen as well as for her role as a tourist, there is a contrast drawn between the speaker of “Santarém” and Mr. Swan, her fellow passenger and foil. The last stanza of “Santarém” narrows to a focus on a specific story of the speaker coming across a wasp’s nest in a pharmacy and finding it “exquisite.” The poem ends:

Back on board, a fellow-passenger, Mr. Swan,  
Dutch, the retiring head of Philips Electric,  
really a very nice old man,  
who wanted to see the Amazon before he died,  
asked, “What’s that ugly thing?”

Mr. Swan, identified by his nationality both in keeping with Bishop’s real life experience and possibly in an effort to extend the caricature of the tourist beyond the American, acts as a counterpoint to the speaker: Mr. Swan doesn’t see the beauty of the Amazon in the same way that the speaker does. Swan travels to Brazil to see the artificial landscape that has been constructed for him: ostensibly the glittery façade of Rio de Janeiro and other heavily trafficked tourist destinations. But, Bishop, I argue, cannot accept the artificial landscape in the same way because by the time she writes this poem she has lived in Brazil and gained access to versions of the vernacular landscapes.

Bishop carefully constructs these two poems in order to heighten the reader’s awareness of differences in the speaker’s subject position. Unlike “Arrival at Santos,”



“Santarém” is written in the past tense as a memory, and the movement at the end of the second poem is back to the boat rather than into the interior. As other scholars have argued, I attribute these differences to the time Bishop spent as a resident in Brazil. She cannot write about the artificial landscapes in the same way once she has been exposed more fully to the vernacular landscape she witnessed in the interior. In “Like Working without Really Doing It”: Elizabeth Bishop’s Brazil Letters and poems,” Joelle Biele writes about the relationship between Bishop’s correspondence and her poetic process: “With the opportunity afforded by time and space, Bishop altered the clear-eyed wonder of her first poems with an ironic, questioning view...Not only is it a goodbye to Brazil, but it is also a goodbye to a process. Memory began to outweigh geography as her subject, and her poems fill with a concentrated sense of loss and wit” (98). As Biele explains, Bishop’s focus on memory is noticeable in the poems in *Questions of Travel* where memory and geography intersect. “Santarém” begins with a question: “Of course I may be remembering it all wrong / after, after—how many years?” Beginning the poem with the uncertainty of memory and announcing the possibility of the speaker’s unreliable narration, the lengthy description that follows becomes less assured—is the memory correct? Is the representation accurate or has it been altered by time?

In many ways, the closing image of “Santarém” is a revision of the ending of “Arrival at Santos” where the reader is about to embark on a journey to the “interior.” In “Santarém” the speaker returns to the ship with the cultural artifact in tow. The motion of “Santarém” is back to the ship, not into Brazil, and Bishop insinuates that Mr. Swan, though “really a very nice old man” cannot truly *see* the Amazon because he doesn’t find beauty in the wasp’s nest as the speaker does. This reading would seem to indicate that

the speaker, over the course of the time between her arrival in Brazil and the writing of this poem later, has learned to value an alternative culture. With the opening couplet in mind, however, the potential for an epiphany in the final stanza is compromised. Though the speaker has perhaps gained an appreciation for the beauty of the Amazon, the translation of this beauty to others, those who themselves who have perhaps even travelled to Brazil, is difficult. Bishop does not end the poem on the gifting of the wasp's next to the speaker, symbolic of her recognition of the natural environment, but rather she ends on Mr. Swan's question: "What's that ugly thing?" Bishop denies the easy answer and asks the reader to reflect on what is at stake for an appraisal of cultural and natural beauty.

When taken in conversation with each other "Arrival at Santos" and "Santarém" illustrate that the subject position of the speaker is paramount to Bishop's concerns about witnessing. In line with what Kelly Oliver later theorizes, Bishop recognizes that tourists often lack certain qualities that enable ethical secondary witnessing. In tension, then, is an awareness that tourists' experiences and representations of those experiences are no less authentic than those of residents, but the spirit of those representations are not generally in line with what is required to act as a witness: empathy, close observation, and the goal of giving testimony to injustice. In the foreword to *American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship*, Philip Deloria writes "People—maybe even global citizens—realize that the experience of the global is inevitably played out in specific localities. No matter the extent to which a problem or an opportunity is conceived on global scales, its human experience will exist in 'the local,' a particular place with particular people and particular histories and structures" (xvi). The connections Deloria draws between the local and the

global have important consequences on how travelers act as witnesses. Bishop's description of a subject position of the outside observer in "Santarém" points to the ability of travelers, who recognize the particularities of culture, place, and people, to bear witness to foreign cultures. In order to justify her position as a secondary witness, Bishop employs poetic methods that emphasize her subject position, especially in terms of her relationship to the environment.

### **Bishop's Careful Spontaneity**

Bishop's "Questions of Travel" features a long list of questions. The most poignant and central question is emphasized by the high "oh": "Oh, must we dream our dreams and have them, too?" While the tourism industry has shifted and grown exponentially in the decades between Bishop's era and now, artificial landscapes that are packaged, disseminated, and often promoted by artists, travelers, and the tourism industry construct a narrow and manipulated version of travel abroad. Bishop's antidote is not made to simplify the process or to too thoroughly criticize the acceptance of these images. It is the act of questioning that is indicated as fruitful for it is this thoughtfulness and empathy that grounds Bishop's poetry about Brazil. Bishop, who had enough experience living there to be considered in the very least a practiced observer, consistently marks her position, and it is with these poetic markers that she acts as an ethical secondary witness to environmental injustice in Brazil.

To this point I have discussed how Bishop's poetry questions others' representations of Brazil, drawing attention to the problems associated with the various commercialized, idealized, exoticized ways Brazil is often depicted. I turn now to how

Bishop attempts to avoid those pitfalls while bringing awareness to the position of the environment as worthy of recognition. Bishop describes the wrongs, both in practice and in representation, enacted against multiple species residing in Brazil, extending her position as a secondary witness as she gives testimony to environmental injustice and the environment itself. Bishop's poetic method in these poems creates parallels between human and non-human experiences; draws attention to the constructedness of representation through idiosyncrasies of verse and poetic stuttering (the repetition and revision of lines and phrases); and Bishop's poems about Brazil often include all three methods, and in doing so, Bishop engages in environmental justice witnessing as a empathetic traveler and observer.

As a poet, Bishop is often referred to as a perfectionist, a tendency that at times makes the poetic output of her more than 50 year poetic career seem meager compared with many other writers.<sup>113</sup> Bishop's perfectionism has bearing on this discussion for multiple reasons: (1) Bishop's propensity for revision indicates that any quirkiness or oddities, whether of form or content, can be regarded as carefully considered choices made by the poet; (2) Poems published late in the poet's career often burgeoned from much earlier experiences and existed in draft form for long periods, making classification by time difficult; (3) like her friend and mentor Marianne Moore, Bishop writes poetry noted for the detailed description that such perfectionism breeds.

In her poems about Brazil as well as others, Bishop marshals her poetic precision to depict issues she finds troubling, particularly those that often go unnoticed in artistic and commercial renderings. In *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions*,

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<sup>113</sup> Bishop repeatedly writes to her publishers promising new poems and discussing revisions on poems written but not yet published.

*Recognitions, Feminism*, rhetorician Wendy S. Hesford discusses the ways in which social issues, especially human rights issues affecting women, are conveyed to the global population. Hesford's main thesis is as follows:

Rather than flatten out the image, I highlight the rhetorical intercontextuality of images and their meanings and approach the human rights spectacle as rhetorical phenomenon through which differently empowered social constituencies negotiate the authority of representation. Furthermore, I argue that spectacular rhetorics and the contradictions that they stage are emblematic of the political and ethical struggles with which human rights advocates and scholars are engaged. (16-17)

Hesford draws from and revises Oliver's theories of witnessing, but one element that remains of major concern is ethical representation, especially because the act of witnessing is one way to counteract the disproportionate power structure that initially incited imbalance and injustice. With the focus on human rights, Hesford's central interest rests on the strategies of representing instances of widely understood trauma—violence that is graphic and visceral. As Hesford argues, "If we accept the notion that witnessing is part of an economy of affect, then we are prompted to consider how human rights media align audiences with the suffering other, the human rights organization, or the media themselves, and how these rhetorical alignments as scenes of address foster certain forms of recognition, engagement, and action" (57). An "economy of affect" is understood with examples that feature undeniable emotion and reaction—the trauma is readily understood as such, and the issue becomes what choices are being made in its representation and conveyance. Bishop, however, draws attention to violence that is

understood as such but uses that violence in service of understanding other types of aggression against other species.

One means of extending the scope of witnessing to include the environment in the subject position is by drawing consistent parallels between human and non-human elements in her depiction of injustice. “Brazil, January 1, 1502” is an example of a poem where the main image centers on humans (indigenous women as victims) but the humans are paired with animals, their equals, throughout the poem.<sup>114</sup> Beginning with an epigraph concerning landscapes depicted in tapestries, Bishop immediately draws attention to representation and nature.<sup>115</sup> This foundation, however, is quickly undercut with the poem’s first two lines: “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs” (91). First, Nature acts as a character herself—“she” has human characteristics in the fact that Nature has ability to greet someone. The possessive “our” is countered by the line-ending “theirs.” Readers are initiated into a binary (us and them) while also recognizing a difference in time by the use of the past tense (“She must have greeted”). Just as quickly as we’re introduced to the human relationship, the stanza finishes with 13 lines detailing the plant life and its colors in the Brazilian jungle and find the entire second stanza to be more description of the environment.

By introducing the social conflict, a colonial one as we later come to understand by the line “‘one leaf yes and one leaf no’ (in Portuguese),” at the outset but delaying its explanation, Bishop asks us to consider the descriptions she provides with as much care as those that involve human figures. Similarly, the closing lines of the second stanza

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<sup>114</sup> See Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* for a careful, and beautiful, poetic reading of “Brazil, January 1, 1502” in which he connects the rape of the women in the poem to the “rape of the virgin land” (64-67).

<sup>115</sup> Epigraph from “Brazil, January 1, 1502”: “‘...embroidered nature...tapestried landscape.’ –*Landscape into Art*, by Kenneth Clark.”

depict a female lizard that foreshadows the appearance of native Brazilian women in the poem:

The lizards scarcely breathe; all eyes  
are on the smaller, female one, back-to,  
her wicked tail straight up and over,  
red as a red-hot wire.

Bishop is quick to point out that the lizard is female. She is in a defensive position, though Bishop's description of her as "wicked" and "red-hot" seem to indicate the lizard's ability to fight for herself. The female lizard's struggle for life is one and the same as the battle the "Indian" women are forced to wage to save themselves from the Portuguese conquistadors. The animal metaphor shifts at the end of the poem from the women as the defensive lizard to the confusion of their voices with bird call. Bishop does not diminish the struggle of the wildlife in deference to the struggle of the native people—both are depicted as suffering under unjust circumstances. The final stanza of the poem returns to the poem's human characters and emphasizes the trauma of colonialization, the trauma of which is more visible because of its human effects. Colonialization, however, is shown as equally violent to the environment as it is to the human residents: "they ripped away into the hanging fabric, / each out to catch an Indian for himself." Bishop refers the Amazonian jungle as "the hanging fabric," which harkens back to the poem's epigraph and the representation that this poem seeks to question. The violence occurs to the environment in the form of the jungle, "the hanging fabric" as branches and bower, being ripped. The intent of the "Christians, hard as nails" is to catch the women so they can rape them. Both land and native people are violated.

By returning to “hanging fabric” near the end, Bishop’s closing lines further echo the role representation plays in humanity’s culpability with violence:

those maddening little women who kept calling,  
calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)  
and retreating, always retreating behind it.

These final lines are illustrative of the connections Bishop draws between humans and non-human natives while also representative of the poetic techniques she consistently employs to render those connections. The women are equated with jungle animals; in this case, the women’s voices could be possibly confused with bird call. This point emphasizes the connections of indigenous people to their native environments—the women blend seamlessly into the jungle landscape. Bishop indicates this blending again, this time by adding an aside in parenthesis. In this case, the parenthetical question addresses the potential confusion of the women’s voices for bird calls. The poem closes with a series of repetition that create a stuttering effect: “calling / calling” and “retreating, always retreating” in such quick succession to one another draws attention to the parallels between the humans and the landscape, but the final “it,” the hanging curtain, points to Bishop’s concern about representation. The leaves of the forest as the hanging curtain conceal the women, but the hanging curtain as the poem’s opening tapestry hides the injustices that take place in Brazil. Bishop’s implied argument in this ending as well as the other poetic devices she returns to in poems about Brazil is that there needs to be a certain transparency in terms of the creator announcing representation as contingent. In so doing, Bishop establishes the human role in experiences as one among many.



“Brazil, January 1, 1502” demonstrates a number of Bishop’s poetic techniques that occur in other poems, particularly ones where it is important for her to emphasize her role as a creator. Bishop often manipulates rhyme (in playful and idiosyncratic ways), line breaks, parenthetical interjections, and repetition in variation as a means to develop a productive uncertainty concerning poetic representation of injustice. The grammatical and technical choices Bishop makes in constructing her poems are instructive in uncovering the meaning of individual poems, yes, but these choices also point to a consistent world view. For instance, parentheses often indicate the inconclusive nature of Bishop’s vision, one that recognizes the interruptions, imperfections, and limitations of human perception. Parentheses work in two main ways in Bishop’s poems: to insert added information or to include internal dialogue. The insertion of added information, as in “In the Waiting Room”<sup>116</sup> or “Pink Dog,”<sup>117</sup> serves to engender the speaker’s thought process and provide explanation. Bishop’s use of parentheses in granting access to the speaker’s internal dialogue, on the other hand, indicates a conflict that diverts the poem’s trajectory. According to Bonnie Costello in her article, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Impersonal Personal,” “The rhythm of long sentences against short, the parentheses, dashes, ellipses, all these impersonal devices (largely ignored by critics) give a personal inflection to the speaker, create an effect of immediate voice” (363). Costello argues that the grammatical effects Bishop employs, one of which is the use of parentheses, create distance because of the attention they draw to poetic technique and representation. In so doing, this space allows for the immediacy of personal thought to exist. The balance between distance and

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<sup>116</sup> “and while I waited I read / the National Geographic / (I could read)”

<sup>117</sup> “Where are your babies? / (A nursing mother, by those hanging teats.)”

immediacy and impersonality and personality is at the crux of Bishop's spontaneous revision. That is, though Bishop's poems create meaning by representing experiences in real time with what seems like unmediated thought, the poems are finely crafted objects.

For Bishop's poems about Brazil, the parentheses play an integral role in emphasizing the speaker's subject position as an outside observer. In the third stanza of "Santarém," Bishop writes, "In front of the church, the Cathedral, rather." Bishop corrects herself here: first she uses "church" to describe the building, but finds that term inaccurate or inadequate. In Portuguese, the word for "cathedral," "catedral," is much closer to its English translation than "igreja" for "church." In terms of her accuracy, "cathedral" is a better choice for Bishop,<sup>118</sup> but she does not need to leave the remnants of her revision in the poem. She certainly does not have to draw attention to the correction by emphasizing her mistake as she does in stanzas four and five:

A river schooner with raked masts  
and violet-colored sails tacked in so close  
her bowsprit seems to touch the church  
  
(Cathedral, rather!). A week or so before  
there'd been a thunderstorm and the Cathedral'd  
been struck by lightning.

The set up of these lines is relevant to a discussion of how Bishop's poetic technique affects her meaning and her overall stance on poetic representation of foreign lands and

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<sup>118</sup> Though Bishop lived in Brazil for 15 years, her Portuguese was not fluent. Her translations are ripe with errors; see Justin Read, "Manners of Mistranslation" for a discussion of Bishop's translations of Brazilian poetry.

cultures. The majority of the poem, five out of six stanzas, focuses on a colorful (“violet-colored”) and detailed (“A river schooner with raked masts”) description of the landscape. Though certainly Brazilian citizens could describe their own country in this vivid light, the richness of the details, both in diction and choice of image, and the choice of images seems to romanticize the place. The care taken in noticing points to the observations of a tourist, arguably an engaged and inquisitive tourist. Further, the parenthetical interruption reminds the reader of the speaker’s concern with the correctness of her description but in so doing she also draws attention to the fact there is a matter of correctness at stake. It is no coincidence that the speaker substitutes “church,” the word more commonly associated with religious buildings in the United States. By repeating the necessity of correction (stanza 3 and stanza 5) draws attention to the mistake.

Once the speaker seems to remember the correct word and adopt it without revision, she does so with the conversational syntax of “the Cathedral’d / been struck.” Ending the line on “Cathedral’d” further emphasizes the word “cathedral” but having the break fall on the contraction of “cathedral” and “had” calls attention to the informality and colloquial nature of the construction. Again, readers are made aware of the speaker’s foreignness to the place she describes: the syntax would be unusual for a non-native English speaker. As with Bishop’s other poems, the line breaks at times seem idiosyncratic and forced,<sup>119</sup> but in their oddity they reveal a carefully crafted playfulness. The relationship between careful construction and spontaneity or uncertainty is consistently found in Bishop’s work, and as the eccentricities remain after Bishop’s

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<sup>119</sup> Most notably, as previously discussed, the stanza break in “Arrival at Santos” that leaves a lone “s” to begin a line: “Her home, when she is at home, is in Glens Fall // s, New York.”

careful revisions, these stutterings point to a poetic ideology and larger world view built on contingency, especially as it relates to representation.

### **“Pink Dog” as Ethical Secondary Witnessing**

Elizabeth Bishop completed “Pink Dog” in 1979, though she began work on it after an experience at Carnival in 1963; it was the last poem she finished before her death. In many ways this poem encapsulates the ways Bishop engages in a form of environmental justice witnessing. One of the reasons for this is that the poem accurately and empathetically reflects Brazilian culture, which is tied inextricably to the environment. Regina Przybycien, one of the first Brazilian scholars to focus on Bishop, however, said at the centennial Bishop conference in Brazil in 2011, “‘Pink Dog’ is a *Carioca* poem that many Americans don’t like and don’t understand...Paradoxically, it is in this poem, in which the person sympathizes with outcasts and shows extreme forms of rejection, that Bishop has gone native. She finally wrote a Brazilian poem” (qtd. in Neely 101). It is not coincidental that Bishop ultimately arrives at what Brazilians consider a Brazilian poem when she uncovers the unique intersections between environment, tradition, and tourism that characterize life for the multiple species residing there. “Pink Dog” is an example of a text that bears witness to the problems that occur when artificial landscapes, here generated for the benefit of the tourism industry, affect, alter, and harm vernacular landscapes and the traditional relationships between indigenous cultures and the environment.

“Pink Dog” is written in second person and addresses a female dog that the speaker sees roaming through the Rio de Janeiro streets; the reader, however, is not

introduced to the dog as the addressee until the second stanza, allowing the play and shock of the third line (“Naked, you trot across the avenue”) to occur before the reader recognizes that a naked dog is not taboo. Further, unorthodox line breaks, as in other poems, jar the reader into recognition of the constructedness of the poem: “Tonight you simply can’t afford to be a- / n eyesore. But no one will ever see a // dog in mascara this time of year.” With true end rhyme in each tercet, the poem’s rhythm is noticeable and sing-songy. This aural and poetic play, though, should not be misinterpreted as casual or light-hearted as this is another instance of Bishop’s calculated spontaneity. “Pink Dog” matches careful craft with a playful tone as well as serious societal critique all the while reminding the reader that the speaker has a specific subject position and vantage point.

Until recently, American scholars have focused not on how this poem negotiates another culture, society, and environment, but for how it depicts sexuality and gender.<sup>120</sup> Catherine Cucinella, for example, argues that the description of the body, particularly the female body, in “Pink Dog” should be identified with the grotesque. As the poem directly describes the masks and costumes of Carnival, visibility and invisibility play central roles in the poem. Cucinella writes, “‘Pink Dog’ foregrounds the dangers of excess within a society predicated on both patriarchy and heterosexuality. The warning the speaker issues to the hairless dog generates from an awareness of what Brazilian society does with those abject being who insist on visibility” (81). Though Cucinella is far more interested in sexuality and the female body than I am here, she also specifies that Brazilian society is the entity on which normalcy is constructed. Brazilian citizens certainly partake in the

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<sup>120</sup> See Steven Gould Axelrod, “Heterotropic Desire in Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Pink Dog’” for a discussion of the relationship between this poem and Cold War mentality. See Helen Vendler, “Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly” where Bishop’s poems are described as “domestic” and “strange” (32).

construction of societal standards, but Bishop also indicates an awareness that Carnival, a celebration particularly associated with Rio de Janeiro, is itself an adaptation from native culture along with aligning a more recent outside force, tourism, with the city's further alteration. Bishop begins, "The sun is blazing and the sky is blue. / Umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue. / Naked, you trot across the avenue" (190). With these three end stopped lines, Bishop's beginning does not seem all the poetic, besides the rhyme perhaps. The sun "blazing" and the blue sky are not particularly poetic, inventive, or even interesting images. This, though, sets the reader in an important location for Brazil; the beach, which is at once a tourist destination but also a location with specific cultural expectations. As Neely explains, the beach in Brazil often seems democratizing as everyone has access to it, but Brazilians differentiate between "'naked' and 'near naked'" in the same way that they differentiate between those who obtain the right kind of golden tan and those that do not (103). The second line introduces the reader to necessity of covering up: the beach is "clothed" with umbrellas. Neely reads the umbrellas as a means of indicating the beach, clothed, as a foil to the pink dog, naked, but there is more to be said about that comparison, especially in terms of the main argument of the poem and the poetic means that argument is drawn. That is, visibility is central to the recognition of injustice. Here, there are two levels of interference from outsiders: Carnival itself a Catholic celebration is therefore associated with the conquistadores' colonization of Brazil and as Carnival is the largest, most widely known event in Brazil, the festival is now a massive tourist attraction the world over. In both cases, indigenous Brazilian culture is covered over in favor of a favorable artificial landscape with which to present visitors. The mundane must be hidden in order to excite the emotions that visitors expect.

Bishop repeatedly returns to images of people, animals, the environment being covered or hidden, and with an ironic tone, indicates that those covers result in dangerous consequences, often for those species that are the least desirable.

Covering the beach in umbrellas is not dangerous nor, really, is the pink dog; although the passersby fear she has rabies, the speaker concludes she's "not mad [but has] a case of scabies." Bishop introduces the undesirable characteristics of the pink dog, but concludes she is "intelligent" in order that the reader recognize that the dog's only crime is being poor, hungry, and uncared for. The dog is not a danger. Danger, however, waits in the poem in two ways: one noticeably violent and demonstrated through images, the other more subtle both in terms of consequences and poetic delivery. First, the crux of the issue in this poem is injustice in physical form:

Didn't you know? It's been in all the papers,  
To solve this problem, how they deal with beggars?  
They take and throw them in the tidal rivers.

Yes, idiots, paralytics, parasites  
Go bobbing in the ebbing sewage, nights  
Out in the suburbs, where there are no lights.

There is an undeniable danger in being an eyesore in a city that fulfills global expectations by being celebratory and glamorous. The solution taken by the Brazilian authorities is to get rid of the beggars as expediently as possible—the injustice of this is apparent. Bishop is drawn to another problem, though, which is that the hiding of this

inhumane practice breeds further injustice and robs the impoverished of visibility, subjectivity, and therefore the possibility of finding better solutions and policies.

Bishop does more in “Pink Dog” than examine Brazilian society for its role in hiding injustices; she positions the global community as culpable in the injustice and equates environmental suffering with human suffering. In other words, she demonstrates the necessity of humans to act as secondary witnesses for environmental concerns to which they may only be connected to as global citizens. Bishop writes,

They say that Carnival’s degenerating  
—radios, Americans, or something,  
have ruined it completely. They’re just talking.

Bishop uses the pronoun “they” throughout the poem; the first instance is in the fifth stanza: “It’s been in all the papers, / to solve this problem, how they deal with beggars?” This “they” establishes an antagonist to the pink dog, and the human population to which the pink dog is equivalent, and thus an insider versus outsider mentality. Choosing to take the dog as the central figure of the poem rather than the beggars, Bishop extends her role as a secondary witness to include other species and therefore acts an environmental justice witness. In this penultimate tercet, the “they” is countered by the “radios, Americans, or something.” Radios, representative of technology that extends the reach of the outside world, and Americans, tourists who visit Brazil to partake in the party of Carnival not the culture, are thus the second set of outsiders featured in the poem. Tourists visit Brazil to participate in Carnival, historically imported to South America as part of Catholic conversion practices, primarily for the entertainment quality of the



festival without thinking about the significant consequences their interactions have on the longevity and sustainability of the Brazilian environment.

The exclamations that close the poem are not of a celebratory nature but rather accentuate the discrepancies between the dejection of societal ill-treatment and the festivity of Carnival. The irony inherent in the hyperbole of “Carnival is always wonderful!” serves to end on the double talk on which the entire poem is constructed: the full rhyme and sing-songy nature is opposed to the seriousness of the concern; the fun of the masks is opposed to the dangers of hiding injustice; the Brazilianness of Carnival is opposed to its colonial roots and its current worldwide spectacle; the recognition of injustice waged against humans as unfair is opposed to the seeming unimportance of the dog’s blight. Bishop takes as her subject human suffering that is largely hidden by artificial landscapes that privilege entertainment but does so in ways that extend the injustice to the environment and all the species that live therein.

## **Conclusion**

Bishop’s poems about Brazil demonstrate the ways in which her subject position shifts from tourist to long-time empathetic observer, but her questioning of individuals’ participation in the global community remains throughout. In “Questions of Travel” she writes,

*“Is it lack of imagination that makes us come  
to imagined places, not just stay at home?”*

*[...]*

*Continent, city, country, society:*

*the choice is never wide and never free.*

*And here, or there...No. Should we have stayed at home,*

*Wherever that may be?"*

For Bishop, her questioning about travel takes a number of forms: Who benefits from travel and in what ways? How does writing about travel affect the locations described? What is belonging, and what forms of belonging establish, perpetuate, and/or harm relationships between humans and other species? The purpose of Bishop's poems is not to answer these questions but to pose them, to expose the holes in the answers that have been posited before. In this way, Bishop's poetry about Brazil complicates what it means to be an environmental justice witness on a global stage.

Bishop's best "answers" come in the form of poems that indicate the future is built on partial, imperfect solutions, the most important elements of which are visibility and recognition. The endings to the poems "Santarém" and "Pink Dog," both published in the year of Bishop's death, illustrate a denial of epiphany. Bishop's belief in the beauty of the wasp's nest is not transferred to the other tourists—Mr. Swan cannot see the true value of the Brazilian landscape; in "Pink Dog," the injustice associated with cleaning up Rio de Janeiro for Carnival will not end, instead the pink dog will be given respite for five days by donning a costume that covers up her poor state. In both cases, the central problem still exists at the end of the poem with Bishop's irony pointing to its probable continuation. The answer, however unsatisfactory, lies in Bishop's attempt at empathetically and ethically representing the lack of solution. In the admission that she cannot find an answer, Bishop points to the complicatedness of representation but also

the necessity of representing those complications. Readers are granted access to aspects of vernacular landscapes that are often masked by the promises of artificial landscapes. In this way, the real Brazil—its colonial history, its tourist driven industry, its traditional relationship between humans and other species—is only discovered when subject positions beyond insider and outsider are made visible.

## CODA

### “THERE IS A SANCTUARY IN THE MIND”: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

#### WITNESSES IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY POETRY

Poets and artists are conversant with centuries of their kind, and their visions may address the most pressing need of the epoch: that of saving the biosphere of Earth. Poetry needs no other justification.

—Carolyn Forché, “Not Persuasion, But Transport:  
The Poetry of Witness”

The trees were gone by the first war. The first to go,  
the most marvelous one, the red cypress,  
made beautiful instruments. The fields,  
not gone, but empty. Cotton turned to soybeans.  
Mussels from the river turned to salvage.  
Fishing for tires on the silted-up water.  
Some are left digging an old bur out of their foot.  
Some go up/ Some go down [Big Tree church sign]  
A race-free conversation hard to have back then.  
Back then, the hotdog wagon doubled as a brothel.  
Come again.

—CD Wright, *One with Others*

CD Wright’s book length poem *One with Others* (2011) exemplifies one of the greatest tensions in writing and studying poetry: how to marshal words towards the depiction of the lived experience. In Wright’s case, the lived experience she chronicles centers on a Civil Rights activist, a white woman and Wright’s mentor, who participated in the 1969 March Against Fear. The poem itself is a contemporary instance of an artist’s use of the poetic form to illuminate a local, historical incident that describes the effects of a social event on a specific landscape as well as the alternate, that a landscape affects the ways a social and cultural event takes place. I conclude this dissertation with Wright because her book, written in the twenty-first century, is in conversation with the women

poets who depicted the integral ties between social and environmental injustice in the twentieth century. Further, Wright acts as an investigative journalist in this poem in much the same ways as Lola Ridge, Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Elizabeth Bishop do when they document, collage, investigate, reflect, and question social and environmental connections. At the center of each poem discussed in these pages are complex problems regarding the unfair distribution of wealth, health, freedom, and visibility based in large part on environmental concerns.

I find one line from the epigraph derived from Wright's poem to be especially illuminating in regards to the necessity of studying earlier women poets: "Some are left digging an old bur out of their foot." The poems by the women poets studied in these pages have simultaneously represented both the bur and the diggers. As the bur, these poets' poetry survives to remind today's readers of events in the cultural history of the United States, but not just of the events themselves but the people, places, and other elements that form the complex systems on which societal history is based. As diggers, these women poets are the ones who through their poetry have asked that their readers examine the difficult, painful, and often ugly parts of a cultural past, both within national borders and beyond. Poet of witness Carolyn Forché describes the tradition of witnessing in this way:

Composing poems and writing stories is a meditative, spiritual act of resistance. It requires a capacity to sustain contemplation, to be attentive to all that is about us, and to hold within ourselves an awareness that we are here, in our living moment, between two unknown realms—before our births and after our deaths. We speak, through art, to the millennia of

artists who came before us, and the art we make will send its messages to the human future. Curiosity about our predecessors and care for our descendents is a collective accomplishment. Art is what has been left behind, and art is what we will leave to the world to come. (“Not Persuasion” 54)

Every poem considered in this dissertation demonstrates that definitions of current resistance and the potential for a “human future” are dependent on complex networks that involve humans with multiple species and varied environments. As exemplified by the poetry written across the twentieth century, the term environmental justice witnessing gives a name to a tradition with deep roots that continue to grow today through the work of contemporary writers, scholars, and activists.

Wright’s *One With Others* is an example of contemporary environmental justice witnessing that focuses on the local events that led V, the poet’s friend and a life-long activist, to participate in the March Against Fear during the Civil Rights era. A town called Big Tree in the Arkansas delta is the setting of the initial civil rights injustices that the poem features. When a high school teacher was fired for writing a letter in which he called for recognition that African Americans were being denied voice, students organized a protest. Wright describes the police action that resulted:

After the pool was drained for the season, they arrested the kids who marched to the white school. Who stood and sang “Like A Tree Planted by the Water.” They took them to the jailhouse in school buses. They took them to the drained pool in sealed 18-wheelers. The sheriff told them they

were to be taken to the woods and there shot. Then the sheriff told them they were to be taken to the pool and there drowned. (53)

The image of the swimming pool, a notoriously segregated space, as the site where African American students were inhumanely held speaks to the ways a history of racial oppression remains tied to certain spaces, places, and environments. Near the end of the poem, Wright writes that the pool has been “buried and paved over” with the old pump-house the only remaining marker of its existence. Wright’s poem as an act of environmental justice witnessing ensures that the oppression waged in that place retains visibility despite the remnants of racist thinking, despite time and change, and despite the deaths of the primary witnesses.

The image of the covered over swimming pool in Wright’s poem is coincidentally echoed by Camille Dungy in her introduction to the anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* when she describes a tree that grew through the filtration system of an abandoned pool. Her description speaks to the experiences that compel acts people to bear witness: “In the same way that my personal journey with the pool and its tree led me from indifference to intrigued observation, to an engagement with the devastating realities of history, and finally into a space of renewed connection to the natural world, the collective voice in this collection cycles through the spectrum of alignment with worlds beyond the human” (Dungy xxi). The poetry in this dissertation, including Wright’s, bears witness to “worlds beyond the human,” and each poet shares the belief that writing about wounds allows the trees of long term and future justices to bring about awareness for the injustices that have been oft-ignored and covered-over.

Wright's long poem includes elements that bear striking resemblances to the poems by Lola Ridge, Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Elizabeth Bishop that have been discussed in this dissertation. Like Ridge herself, Wright focuses on the activism of a woman who does not belong to the oppressed population for whom she bears witness. Wright's documentary collage aesthetic including accounts from various sources and primary witnesses is reminiscent of Rukeyser's poetics in "The Book of the Dead." Invested in bearing witness to racial injustice, the themes of Wright's poem very much speak to the themes of integration and safe, healthy environments for all races and classes of people that are central to the activism Brooks seeks in "In the Mecca." Poetically, Wright draws portraits of people and places and intersperses them throughout the poem in much the same way as Brooks. Wright shares with Bishop a concern for how representation can, in the wrong, unsympathetic hands, alter, amend, ignore, and manipulate history. Wright's inclusion of so many voices and genres in her poem speak to the idea that a polyvocal rendering is the most accurate and ethical means of bearing witness.

In examining the ways representation of environmental injustice occurs in the poetry discussed in this dissertation, I unite the work of late modernist women poets who, though initially drawn to writing about social injustices, tie human injustice to the environment. Further, this research will allow other poetry and works of art to be understood as bearing witness to complex injustices that affect multiple species over time and across place. Though the term environmental justice witnessing can be used to theorize other, varied acts of bearing witness, it is no coincidence that the treatment of nature as an entity worthy of testimony becomes so intertwined with the work of women



poets in the twentieth century. Global and national conceptions of nature, home, environment, and travel all shift significantly during this period as well as conceptions of race, class, and culture. Rukeyser ends “The Book of the Dead” with this tercet:

desire, field, beginning. Name and road,  
communication to these many men,  
as epilogue, seeds of unending love. (111)

Here, Rukeyser matches the human with the natural, the rural with the industrial, the future with acts in the present. Understanding that the human future depends on ecologically just decisions in the present is a concept that is only now beginning to inform global thinking. By connecting communication, naming, and dissemination, Rukeyser recognizes the importance of documenting earlier errors in order to provide recompense for past ills as well as avoid future disasters. Bearing witness is a seed that requires love, understanding, and compassion, but it is also an act that furthers these traits. The human future and the worlds beyond the human depend on the awareness for which poems such as these call. Poets of witness long have and will continue to ask for awareness and action; the future for humans and all species rests on how well today’s global citizens heed their calls.

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APPENDIX A

LOLA RIDGE'S SIMILES IN "THE GHETTO"

Similes occur throughout “The Ghetto” to various effect, though tracing Ridge’s similes reveals patterns and themes within the sections and across the poem. This appendix is meant as a resource to, first, catalog the similes in order to illustrate the presence of images with negative, dangerous, or decaying connotations throughout the poem, even in the more celebratory final section. Second, the brief explanations aim to point to major themes in the hopes that readers may pay closer attention to the thematic repetition that echoes the ways the natural world gives way to the difficulty of urban life.

## I

The first section uses a total of eight similes, all of which utilize images that are in some way compromised or unpleasant.

- “The heat.../ Nosing in the body’s overflow/ **Like** a beast pressing its great steaming belly close, / Covering all avenues of air...”(3)
- “The heat in Hester Street, / Heaped **like** a dray / With the garbage of the world.” (3)
- “Herring-yellow faces, spotted **as** with a mold” (3)
- “most faces of girls / **Like** dank white lilies” (3)
- “And infants’ faces with open parched mouths / that such at the air **as** at empty teats.” (3)
- “The street crawls undulant, / **Like** a river addled / with its hot tide of flesh that ever thickens.” (4)
- “Heavy surges of flesh / Break over the pavements, / Clavering **like** a surf—”(4)
- “Under the molten silence / Of the desert **like** a stopped wheel” (5)

## II

The second section again uses eight similes, and these similes center around images of things that are wrong, broken, or dead.

- “Time spins **like** a crazy dial in his brain” (5)
- “the candles gleaming starkly / [...] / **Like** a miswritten psalm” (5)
- “lifted praise, / **Like** a broken whinnying / Before the Lord’s shut gate.” (6)
- “the heat—**like** a kept corpse” (6)
- “Sadie quivers **like** a rod...”(6)
- “Alert, yet weary...**like** a bird / That all night long has beat about a light.” (7)
- “break an ideal **like** an egg for the winged thing at the core” (8)
- “Her mind is hard and brilliant and cutting / **like** an acetylene torch.” (8)

## III

Section III features five similes that emphasize panic, fleeing, closure, and negative expression.

- “Her braided head, / [...] / is poised **as** for flight.” (9)
- “A shadow / **As** of a drawn blind.” (10)
- “she is stiff / **Like** a doll...” (10)
- “she darts through the crowd / **Like** a little white panic / Blown along the night” (10)
- “drums rattling **like** curses in red roaring mouths...” (10)

#### IV

Section IV contains thirteen similes. These images are not as negative in connotation as the previous sections. Most of the similes here contain household items that emphasize the contrasts between new and old.

- “(White beards, black beards / **Like** knots in the weave...)” (11-12)
- “Baskets full of babies / **Like** grapes on a vine” (12)
- “Grand street **like** a great bazaar” (12)  
“Crowded **like** a float” (12)  
“Bulging **like** a crazy quilt / stretched on a line.” (12)
- “colors decomposing / Faded **like** old hair” (12)
- “The glitter and the jumbled finery / strangely juxtaposed / cans, paper, rags / [...] / Flung / **Like** an ancient tapestry of motley weave / upon the open wall of this new land.” (12-13)
- “Their hoarded looks / Upon his merchandise, / **As** though it were some splendid cloth / Or sumptuous raiment / Stitched in gold and red...” (13)
- “He fingers lovingly each calico, / **As** though it were a gorgeous shawl, / Or costly venture / Wrought in silken thread, / Or strange bright carpet / Made for sandaled feet...” (13)
- “His soul is **like** a rock / that bears a front worn smooth / By the coarse friction of the sea” (14)
- “Born to trade **as** to a caul” (14)
- “Demand goes to him **as** the bee to the flower” (15)
- “nature balanced **like** the scales at nought” (15)

#### V

The fifth section has only two similes, the fewest of the poem’s sections. Both indicate a measure of time (“old” and “endless”). The first focuses on the physical world and the second on the spiritual realm.

- “flesh empurpled **like** old meat” (16)
- “Linking the tenements / **Like** an endless prayer” (17)

#### VI

Section VI includes five similes that relate to death and decomposition.

- “The chairs, loose-jointed, / Creaking **like** old bones” (17)
- “old wheezy breaths / Pass around old thoughts, / dry **as** snuff” (17)
- “life is flattened and ground **as** by many mills” (18)
- “a dull fury in his eyes, **like** little rusty grates” (18)
- “He rises slowly, / Trembling in his many swathing **like** an awakened mummy” (18)

#### VII

Section VII has 10 similes. Further, these similes occur in fairly quick succession. The similes in the section are the most positive, common, and natural of the poem.

- “this room, bare **like** a barn” (19)
- “unkempt faces, / Pale **as** lard” (19)

- “Words, words, words, / Pattering **like** hail, **Like** hail falling without aim” (19)
- “Waving arms **like** overgrowths.” (20)
- “a thin voice piping / **Like** a flute among trombones” (20)
- “His words knock each other **like** little wooden blocks.” (20)
- “Baffling minors / Half-heard **like** rain on pools” (20)
- “waving their dreams **like** flags” (21)
- “the waste light of stars, / As cold **as** wise men’s eyes” (21)
- “this shut-in room, / Bare **as** a manger” (21)

## VIII

Section VIII includes thirteen similes, but the similes in this section often stack, comparing one item to multiple comparisons. Though not entirely positive, the similes in this section are not as negative as many of the previous sections.

- “the stark trunks of the factories / Melt into the drawn darkness, / Sheathing **like** a seamless garment.” (21)
- “And mothers take home their babies, / Waxen and delicately curled, / **Like** little potted flowers closed under the stars.” (21)
- “Staring **as** through a choked glass.” (22)
- “creeping to their cots / Softly, **as** on naked feet...”  
“Lolling on the coverlet...**like** a woman offering her white body.” (22)
- “Nude glory of the Moon! / That leaps **like** an athlete” (22)
- “breasts that are smooth and cool / **as** mother-of-pearl” (22)
- “the nipples tingle and burn **as** though little lips plucked at them.” (22)
- “their ears are filled **as** with a delirious rhapsody”  
“Life, **like** a drunken player”  
“Strikes out of their clear white bodies / **as** out of ivory keys” (22)
- “the stars / That grow tender and comforting **like** the eyes of comrades”  
“the moon rolls behind the Battery / **Like** a word molten out of the mouth of God.” (23)
- “Pale worn gold **like** the settings of old jewels” (23)
- “burning spires in aureoles of light / **Like** shimmering auras.” (23)
- “Little oval mirrors **like** tiny pools.” (23)
- “the moon burnishes his mirrors till they shine **like** phosphorus...”  
“The moon **like** a skull” (23)

## IX

The final section includes six similes, one set of similes that repeatedly revises the original comparison. This section returns to earlier images, heat and flesh in particular, and indicates the complexity of emotion as the similes are at times celebratory and at other times disparaging.

- “A little wind / Stirs idly—**as** an arm / Trails over a boat’s side in dalliance” (24)
- “Hester Street, / **Like** a forlorn woman over-born / By many babies at her teats” (24)
- “clinging over the pushcarts / **Like** a litter of tiny bells / Or the jingle of silver coins, / Perpetually changing hands, / Or **like** the Jordan somberly / Swirling in tumultuous uncharted tides, / Surface-calm” (25)
- “Throwing off thoughts **like** sparks” (25)

- “Life leaping in the shaken flesh / **Like** flame at an asbestos curtain.” (25)
- “Strong flux of life, / **Like** a bitter wine / Out of the bloody stills of the world... / Out of the Passion eternal.” (26)

In the following section of this appendix, I have grouped the similes by major thematic concerns. That is, I have collected the similes that all point towards decay, for example, to show more clearly how frequently these images appear as similes in “The Ghetto.” Each simile is followed by its section number and page number.

#### Nature

- “The heat.../ Nosing in the body’s overflow/ **Like** a beast pressing its great steaming belly close, / Covering all avenues of air...”(I, 3)
- “most faces of girls / **Like** dank white lilies” (I, 3)
- “The street crawls undulant, / **Like** a river addled / with its hot tide of flesh that ever thickens.” (I, 4)
- “Alert, yet weary...**like** a bird / That all night long has beat about a light.” (II, 7)
- “break an ideal **like** an egg for the winged thing at the core” (II, 8)
- “His soul is **like** a rock / that bears a front worn smooth / By the coarse friction of the sea” (IV, 14)
- “Baskets full of babies / **Like** grapes on a vine” (IV, 12)
- “Sadie quivers **like** a rod...”(II, 6)
- “Demand goes to him **as** the bee to the flower” (IV, 15)
- “Words, words, words, / Pattering **like** hail, **Like** hail falling without aim” (VII, 19)
- “Waving arms **like** overgrowths.” (VII, 20)
- “Baffling minors / Half-heard **like** rain on pools” (VII, 20)
- “And mothers take home their babies, / Waxen and delicately curled, / **Like** little potted flowers closed under the stars.” (VIII, 21)
- “Little oval mirrors **like** tiny pools.” (VIII, 23)
- “the moon burnishes his mirrors till they shine **like** phosphorus...”(VIII, 23)
- “Or **like** the Jordan somberly / Swirling in tumultuous uncharted tides, / Surface-calm” (IX, 25)
- “breasts that are smooth and cool / **as** mother-of-pearl” (VIII, 22)

#### Objects (generally cloth and textile related)

- “(White beards, black beards / **Like** knots in the weave...)” (IV, 11-12)
- “Bulging **like** a crazy quilt / stretched on a line.” (IV, 12)
- “The glitter and the jumbled finery / strangely juxtaposed / cans, paper, rags / [...] / Flung / **Like** an ancient tapestry of motley weave / upon the open wall of this new land.” (IV, 12-13)
- “Their hoarded looks / Upon his merchandise, / **As** though it were some splendid cloth / Or sumptuous raiment / Stitched in gold and red...” (IV, 13)
- “He fingers lovingly each calico, / **As** though it were a gorgeous shawl, / Or costly venture / Wrought in silken thread, / Or strange bright carpet / Made for sandaled feet...” (IV, 13)



- “the stark trunks of the factories / Melt into the drawn darkness, / Sheathing **like** a seamless garment.” (VIII, 21)

#### Decay/Aging/Death

- “The heat in Hester Street, / Heaped **like** a dray / With the garbage of the world.” (I, 3)
- “Herring-yellow faces, spotted **as** with a mold” (I, 3)
- “the heat—**like** a kept corpse” (6)
- “flesh empurpled **like** old meat” (V, 16)
- “The chairs, loose-jointed, / Creaking **like** old bones” (VI, 17)
- “a dull fury in his eyes, **like** little rusty grates” (VI, 18)
- “He rises slowly, / Trembling in his many swathing **like** an awakened mummy” (VI, 18)
- “The moon **like** a skull” (VIII, 23)
- “Staring **as** through a choked glass.” (VIII, 22)
- “Under the molten silence / Of the desert **like** a stopped wheel” (I, 5)

#### Body

- “And infants’ faces with open parched mouths / that such at the air **as** at empty teats.” (I, 3)
- “Time spins **like** a crazy dial in his brain” (II, 5)
- “colors decomposing / Faded **like** old hair” (IV, 12)
- “drums rattling **like** curses in red roaring mouths...” (III, 10)
- “the waste light of stars, / As cold **as** wise men’s eyes” (VII, 21)
- “creeping to their cots / Softly, **as** on naked feet...” (VIII, 22)
- “Lolling on the coverlet...**like** a woman offering her white body.” (VIII, 22)
- “the nipples tingle and burn **as** though little lips plucked at them.” (VIII, 22)
- “Born to trade **as** to a caul” (IV, 14)
- “the stars / That grow tender and comforting **like** the eyes of comrades” (VIII, 23)
- “A little wind / Stirs idly—**as** an arm / Trails over a boat’s side in dalliance” (IX, 24)

#### Person

- “Heavy surges of flesh / Break over the pavements, / Clavering **like** a surf—” (I, 4)
- “Nude glory of the Moon! / That leaps **like** an athlete” (VIII, 22)
- “Hester Street, / **Like** a forlorn woman over-born / By many babies at her teats” (IX, 24)

#### Fire/Heat

- “Her mind is hard and brilliant and cutting / **like** an acetylene torch.” (II, 8)
- “Throwing off thoughts **like** sparks” (IX, 25)
- “Life leaping in the shaken flesh / **Like** flame at an asbestos curtain.” (IX, 25)
- “burning spires in aureoles of light / **Like** shimmering auras.” (VIII, 23)

#### Religious

- “the candles gleaming starkly / [...] / **Like** a miswritten psalm” (II, 5)
- “lifted praise, / **Like** a broken whinnying / Before the Lord’s shut gate.” (II, 6)

- “Linking the tenements / **Like** an endless prayer” (V, 17)
- “Strong flux of life, / **Like** a bitter wine / Out of the bloody stills of the world... / Out of the Passion eternal.” (IX, 26)
- “the moon rolls behind the Battery / **Like** a word molten out of the mouth of God.” (VIII, 23)

#### Flight/Air

- “Her braided head, / [...] / is poised **as** for flight.” (III, 9)
- “she darts through the crowd / **Like** a little white panic / Blown along the night” (III, 10)

#### Place

- “Grand street **like** a great bazaar” (IV, 12)
- “this shut-in room, / Bare **as** a manger” (VII, 21)
- “this room, bare **like** a barn” (VII, 19)
- “life is flattened and ground **as** by many mills” (VI, 18)

#### Things

- “Crowded **like** a float” (IV, 12)
- “unkempt faces, / Pale **as** lard” (VII, 19)
- “His words knock each other **like** little wooden blocks.” (VII, 20)
- “waving their dreams **like** flags” (VII, 21)
- “A shadow / **As** of a drawn blind.” (III, 10)
- “she is stiff / **Like** a doll...” (III, 10)
- “old wheezy breaths / Pass around old thoughts, / dry **as** snuff” (VI, 17)
- “Pale worn gold **like** the settings of old jewels” (VIII, 23)

#### Music/Sound

- “a thin voice piping / **Like** a flute among trombones” (VII, 20)
- “nature balanced **like** the scales at nought” (IV, 15)
- “their ears are filled **as** with a delirious rhapsody” (VIII, 22)
- “Life, **like** a drunken player” (VIII, 22)
- “Strikes out of their clear white bodies / **as** out of ivory keys” (VIII, 22)
- “clinging over the pushcarts / **Like** a litter of tiny bells / Or the jingle of silver coins, / Perpetually changing hands,” (IX, 25)