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**DOCUMENTARY POETRY AND AMERICAN MODERNISM FROM THE
DEPRESSION TO WORLD WAR 2**

A Dissertation in English

by

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that American modernist poets sought out and incorporated innovations from documentary film, photography, and traditions of testimonial witness in an effort to create poetry that could engage and respond to contemporary political and social issues. Documentary art and media dominated American mass culture between the Depression and World War 2, and poets seized upon the cultural authority and semblance of objectivity that documentary provided for their work. Recent scholars have recognized the importance of documentary to American modernist art and literature, yet the productive relationship between documentary and American modernist poetry has been overlooked.

This thesis will show that documentary poetics is essentially an interdisciplinary practice, borrowing and adapting developments from film and photography in order to shape a variety of source materials. American documentary poets also experimented with a myriad of primary resources, ranging from presidential letters, legal reports, government hearings, historical and political texts, and eyewitness accounts, while simultaneously experimenting with poetic form and arrangement. This study ultimately seeks to establish the importance of documentary poetry and its engagement with the politics and culture of the 1930s and 40s. In doing so, it makes the following threefold argument: that documentary poetry is an important aspect of the history and development of American literary modernism; that documentary poetry is a prominent documentary art alongside photography, film, and other visual arts; and finally that documentary poetry serves as a significant barometer of social change, demonstrating how poetic practices

articulated and responded to various political movements throughout the decades under consideration.

In particular, this thesis examines the work of five poets writing between the Depression and World War 2: Joseph Kalar, Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, Muriel Rukeyser, and John Beecher. In chapter one, on Joseph Kalar and his proletarian sketch poetry written for *New Masses*, I discuss how his poetic sketches reveal the diversity of cultural and political attitudes found in the American working class of the late 1920s, and how his documentary work feeds into the larger worker-correspondent system that was being developed for the magazine. In chapter two, on Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky's competing documentary histories of the United States, I show how their respective fascist and socialist political ideologies frame the wide range of historical texts that they weave into their poetic documentaries. In chapter three, on Muriel Rukeyser's documentary project on the Gauley Bridge mining disaster, I examine her projected adaptation of her poem "The Book of the Dead" as a documentary film, "Gauley Bridge." In chapter four, on John Beecher's New Deal documentary poems, I investigate how he incorporated his field reports as an administrator for the FSA and FEPC into his poetry. Finally, in a brief epilogue, I discuss the trajectory of American documentary poetics after 1945.

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Introduction: A Background to American Documentary Poetry, 1929-1945

The period between the start of the Depression and the conclusion of World War 2 marked a strong engagement with documentary in the visual and literary arts in the United States. The desire to record the social and cultural landscape of the country emerged from a variety of political and economic developments, beginning with the market crash of 1929. Documentary photography, which had gained national attention in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the efforts of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, became a fixture in magazines and periodicals such as *U.S. Camera*, *Fortune*, and *Life*, revealing the hardships of the Depression to their audiences.¹ Additionally, the New Deal incorporated photography as a means to document its public works projects in order to show its successes and the necessity for further government action. The photographs taken under the auspices of the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration were made popular in documentary photo-text works such as Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor's *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939) and James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941).² Documentary film and newsreels also featured workers and farmers afflicted by the Depression and unemployment. In the early 1930s, the Workers' Film and Photo League of America produced documentary films in an effort to record the hunger marches,

¹ Jacob Riis' *How The Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890) was a groundbreaking work of photojournalism that documented the harsh life of the New York slums and tenements. Lewis Hine's work for the National Child Labor Committee (1908-1918) brought attention to practices of child labor in American industry. See Raeburn 13-14 for a discussion of the inclusion of documentary photography in American periodicals and magazines in the 1930s.

² Both Lange and Evans worked for the RA and the FSA documenting the poverty of American sharecroppers and farmers. For more information on American documentary photography between the Depression and World War 2, see Maren Strange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* and James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*.

breadlines, and masses of unemployed workers.³ The League's documentary films borrowed heavily from newsreels and were, in effect, compilations of spliced footage. As the New Deal became involved in documentary film production and the budgets increased, American documentary film became more developed and reached a broader audience. The most prominent examples of the commercial success of documentary film were Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937), which both benefited from New Deal administrative support and large-scale distribution.⁴

The onset of World War 2 shifted the focus of American documentary arts from the Depression to the wars on the European continent and Pacific, as well as the effort to build workforces for the defense industry. As unemployment decreased due to mobilization and increasing job opportunities in war industries, photographic and filmic images of American unity and solidarity replaced images of unemployed workers and desperate farmers.⁵ Documentary photographers self-consciously emphasized sacrifice and the willingness to fight in both the theatres of war and within the war industry plants at home. Scenes of war were shown in theaters across the United States in newsreels, while filmmakers such as John Ford and Frank Capra presented gritty episodes of battle within their documentaries.⁶ These

³ The Workers' Film and Photo League was recognized by the Communist International and received financial support from the Workers' International Relief. The League's film style reflected Soviet documentary aesthetics, which emphasized the use of spliced and juxtaposed footage over dramatically rendered scenes. For more on the League see Barsam 146-47 and Campbell 29-70.

⁴ For more information on the promotion and success of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River*, see Barsam 156-57.

⁵ See Raeburn's discussion of "Images of America" (1941) and the differences between earlier FSA exhibits, which featured extended treatments of unemployed workers and farmers (191).

⁶ "The March of Time" (1935-51) and "This is America" (1942-51) are important examples of the newsreel that brought carefully edited information about World War 2 to thousands of American theatres. John Ford's *The Battle of Midway* (1942) won an Academy Award for best documentary film. Frank Capra's highly successful propagandistic seven-part documentary film series *Why We Fight* (1942-45) introduced its American audience to the different fronts of World War 2.

films and photographs sought to establish the promise of democracy, while providing a sharp contrast to the horrors of fascism and totalitarianism. Oftentimes, American wartime documentary verged upon outright propaganda and glorification of the United States as the guardian of democracy on the world stage. Documentary film and photography were both engaged, therefore, in a project of defining American culture and its future between the Depression and World War 2.

Scholars have commented on what William Stott has dubbed the “documentary motive” at work in the photography, film, and photo-texts produced between the Depression and World War 2.⁷ According to Stott, documentary is not only central to American modernism and culture but also inextricable from its aesthetic production. Yet the relationship between documentary and poetry of the period has received little attention.⁸ In recent decades the critical ground for addressing documentary poetics has been established by works that seek to recover the political and social valences of American poetry of the 30s and early 40s. Cary Nelson’s *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Meaning 1910-1945* (1989) opened the floodgates to new historical and political approaches and contexts for American radical poetry. Subsequent critical works such as Walter Kalaidjian’s *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism & Postmodern Critique* (1993), Robert Shulman’s *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered* (2000), and Michael Thurston’s *Making Something Happen:*

⁷ Concerning the “documentary motive,” Stott wrote: “a documentary motive was at work throughout the culture of [the 1930s]: in the rhetoric of the New Deal and the WPA arts projects; in painting, dance, fiction, and theater; in the new media of radio and picture magazines; in popular thought, education, and advertising” (4). It is notable that Stott does not include poetry within this list.

⁸ For book length treatments of documentary poetry see Monique Claire Vescia’s *Depression Glass: Documentary Photography and the Medium of the Camera Eye in Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and William Carlos Williams*. For articles see David Kadlec, “Early Soviet Cinema and American Poetry,” and Michael Thurston’s “Documentary Modernism as Popular Front Poetics: Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘Book of the Dead.’”

American Political Poetry Between the World Wars (2001) demonstrate how American poetry addressed and responded to the political upheavals of the Depression, the sectarian battles within the cultural left, the growing threat of fascism, and the global conflagration of World War 2. And recently, Monique Claire Vescia's *Depression Glass: Documentary Photography and the Medium of the Camera Eye in Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and William Carlos Williams* (2006) examines documentary poetry in light of the relationship between Objectivist poetics and documentary praxis.⁹

However there has yet to be a systematic study on American documentary poetry that encompasses the variety of political, social, and cultural concerns that fueled documentary production between the Depression and World War 2. In this work, I attempt to chart new territory by taking a comprehensive approach to documentary poetry from the 1930s and 40s, bringing together a broad range of poets, works, and styles in order to add poetics as one of the important genres participating in Stott's "documentary motive" of the time. Drawing from the work of recent scholars that have excavated the political and social contexts of American poetry, this thesis will examine how documentary poetry articulated and responded to the national and international political climate of the 1930s and 40s that comprised a volatile mix of socialism, fascism, Communism, the Popular Front, New Deal liberalism, and the various conversations between these political programs. The poets included in this work, therefore, run the gamut of political affiliations. My aim will be to demonstrate how each documentary poet made his or her intervention into the politics of the time, ultimately

⁹ Vescia's book is a tremendous resource, not only concerning the relationship between Objectivist poetry and documentary production, but also in its examination of how the technical aspects of documentary photography affected the ways in which Reznikoff, Oppen, and Williams organized their poetic data and information.

locating their work and the subjects of their documentaries in the context of the decades under review.

Additionally, this work will attempt to answer how poetry uniquely addresses the forms and structures of documentary. I argue that documentary poetics is essentially an interdisciplinary practice, borrowing and adapting developments from film and photography in order to shape a variety of source materials. Documentary poetics makes use of the found object — the verbal or visual particular that can be rendered as evidence by the poet in order to support a construction of a social narrative, a specific argument, or political position. These found objects come from a variety of texts, discourses, and perspectives: legal records, speeches, personal correspondence, interviews, government hearings, newspapers, advertising, and personal eyewitness accounts. The task of the poet-documentarian is to effectively arrange these found objects in order to draw attention to its poetic arrangement, while simultaneously depicting a scene or event that produces a larger social, cultural, or political argument. Through showing the importance of documentary poetry and its engagement with the politics and culture of the 1930s and 40s, this work argues that documentary poetry is an important aspect of the history and development of American literary modernism and locates it as a prominent documentary art alongside photography, film, and other visual arts.

Poetry and poetic theory has long been central to the theorization of documentary as a modernist art. John Grierson, the prominent Scottish documentary filmmaker who first used the word “documentary” in reference to film, viewed poetics as a means to describe the

potential of documentary film.¹⁰ In his “First Principles of Documentary” (1932), Grierson criticizes what he called the “symphonic” trend in documentary film, exemplified by Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927). The work provides a sweeping overview of a single day in Berlin through juxtaposing and splicing numerous scenes of city life, architectural expanses, and industry. Ruttmann described *Berlin* as a symphony because the pacing and tempo of the film shots moved according to the soundtrack rather than a narrative voiceover or plot elements. Grierson argued that although *Berlin* and other symphonic documentaries were immense technical feats, they fell short of having an ethos of social value and responsibility necessary for documentary film: “The little daily doings, however finely symphonized, are not enough. One must pile up beyond doing or process to creation itself, before one hits the higher reaches of art. In this distinction, creation indicates not the making of things but the making of virtues” (“First Principles” 150).¹¹ In opposition to the symphonic form, Grierson advocated a “realist” style of documentary film:

[R]ealist documentary, with its streets and cities and slums and markets and exchanges and factories, has given itself the job of making poetry where no poet has gone before it, and where no ends, sufficient for the purposes of art, are easily observed. It requires not only taste but also inspiration, which is to say a very laborious, deep-seeing, deep-sympathizing creative effort indeed (“First Principles” 151).

According to Grierson, the difference between symphonic and realist forms of documentary film emerges from the latter’s ability to go beyond the sweeping descriptive surface and use

¹⁰ Regarding Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (1926), a documentary travelogue film which depicted the traditional lives of the Polynesians of Samoa, John Grierson wrote: “[Flaherty’s film] being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth has documentary value” (*Grierson* 13).

¹¹ Grierson’s “First Principles of Documentary” was first published in *Cinema Quarterly* (Winter 1932). The edition of the essay that I am using is from *Grierson on Documentary*, Forsyth Hardy, ed.

the details of the city, slums, and markets to create new social values and ways of looking at the object. Grierson not only compares this process to the writing of poetry, but also specifically names Imagism as the poetic form associated with realist documentary later in the essay. He writes: “The imagist or more definitely poetic approach might have taken our consideration of documentary a step further, but no great imagist film has arrived to give character to the advance. By imagism I mean the telling of story or illumination of theme by images, as poetry is story or theme told by images: I mean the addition of poetic reference to the ‘mass’ and ‘march’ of the symphonic form” (“First Principles” 152).

Grierson’s reference to Imagism recalls Ezra Pound’s “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” (1913), written almost twenty years prior to his formulation of realist documentary film. In his influential manifesto, Pound provides suggestions on meter, rhythm, and poetic composition to the prospective student and poet. Concerning the image, Pound defines it as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time . . . It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art” (“Few Don’ts” 200). Although not usually considered when theorizing documentary, Pound’s concept of imagism raises interesting questions about the relationship between the documented subject and the director who captures the image. The imagistic complex involves fidelity to fact and authentic experience as well as the emotional state of the poet creating the image. Grierson’s adaptation of Imagism to documentary film attempts to replicate the experience of the complex by bringing a “deep-seeing” and “deep-sympathizing” gaze to the raw and gritty details of his urban and industrial landscapes. Realist documentary, according to Grierson,

goes beyond symphonic films such as *Berlin* because of its ability to provide a tightly bound emotional and intellectual account of the subject matter. Whereas symphonic films can provide the brushstrokes of details, the application of Imagism to documentary films allows the viewer to experience and witness the *revelation* of those details as they are placed in relation to one another.

The cross-pollination between poetic Imagism and Grierson's concept of realist documentary film provides a broad context for documentary poetry that places excerpts from different texts, histories, and other pieces of documentary evidence into relation with one another in order to make an argument or reveal a broad pattern of injustice. In this thesis, the poets who exemplify this particular style and form of documentary poetics are Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, and Muriel Rukeyser. All three poets, as I will show, draw extensively from archival and text-based sources and arrange their materials to build a poetic documentary record. Pound, Zukofsky, and Rukeyser in effect create their own poetic images from the archives they form within their poetry, giving the reader both the social import and the documentary sources to engage their content.

However, American documentary poetry from the Depression to World War 2 also draws from other aesthetic lineages apart from the imagist and realist modes. In his *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, William Stott argues that the ethos of the eyewitness and personal experience was central to American documentary production. Similar to Grierson, Stott uses a poetic example to frame his argument. He writes that "no other time so prized the Whitmanian 'I' – able to see, incorporate, and give voice to all human experience . . . Whitman's stance of *being there* was a criterion of authenticity in expression at the time. To be trustworthy, a speaker needed to be the man or a first witness"

(Stott 36).¹² The poetic persona and testimonial voice of Whitman was extremely influential in the production of documentary films and photo-text collections. The rhetorical force fueling the Whitmanian “I” can be found in the voiceovers for American documentary films in the 1930s, a notable example being Lorentz’s *The River*.¹³ Additionally, the act of witnessing and cataloguing the United States that marks Whitman’s long poems operate within the photojournalism of the period. Works such as Ernest Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* and Lange and Taylor’s *American Exodus* canvas the nation, visually and verbally depicting the unemployed and migrant workers through photography and short poetic captions. The authority and authenticity of these documentary works ultimately rely upon the strength and ethos of the testimonial voice.

Documentary poetry from the 30s and 40s also employed the authority of the witness and testimonial style to deliver its material. In distinction to text-based documentary poetry, which relied upon the cutting and splicing of primary sources to form its material, the testimonial poetry included in this thesis structures its documentary content upon the lived experience and personal witness expressed through the poetic “I.” Accordingly, the poets who worked within this genre of documentary poetry focused upon cultivating a distinct persona and crafting a strong social rhetoric to address the issues and events that mark their work. The veracity of their poetic content does not derive from archival sources or material documents, but rather from the informative content of their poetic journalism, the ethos of their persona, and the political and social context from which they speak. In this thesis, the

¹² Also see Vescia’s discussion of Stott’s use and explanation of Whitman in *Depression Glass*, xviii.

¹³ In his *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History*, Richard Barsam argues that, “Lorentz’s narration [for *The River*] does not reflect political rhetoric so much as it does the influence of Walt Whitman’s transcendent free verse” (155).

poets who employ a strong testimonial voice and ethos to undergird their work include Joseph Kalar and John Beecher.

This thesis is structured chronologically to emphasize both the different types of documentary poetry and the how the political and social developments in the United States and Europe affected poetic production. Chapter 1, “Joseph Kalar, *New Masses*, and the Development of Proletarian Documentary Poetry,” explores the worker-correspondent system that editor Mike Gold developed for the *New Masses* between 1928-1930 and the documentary poetry that Kalar wrote for the magazine during those years. Kalar, a lumber and iron-ore worker from International Falls, MN, took part in Gold’s proletarian experiment in which he called for prose, poetry, letters, and artwork from workers across the United States. The purpose was to create an American proletarian workers’ culture from which a workers’ art could emerge. In an effort to write quickly about his experiences on the road, Kalar developed what he later called the “proletarian sketch” – a prose-poetic form of documentary journalism that closely resembled reportage. His documentary sketches reveal the diversity of political and cultural attitudes amongst workers: a quality in his work that eventually became a source of tension between him and the magazine as *New Masses* began to reflect a more orthodox Communist ideology at the start of the 1930s.

Chapter 2, “Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky’s Documentary Histories of the United States in the *Eleven New Cantos* and “A”-8,” looks at each poet’s use and framing of American history through the incorporation of historical texts, presidential letters and memoirs, and political and economic writings in their respective documentary poems. Pound and Zukofsky’s poetic debate over American history highlights each poet’s commitment to a particular set of economic and political theories. In recent years

scholars have shown how Pound's views on Social Credit and the circulation of money were central to his understanding of Mussolini's Italy and his poetry of the 1930s.

However, less explored is Zukofsky's commitment to socialism and Marxist theories of labor and its relationship to his documentary poetics. Using their correspondence during the composition of *Eleven New Cantos* (1934) and "A"-8 (1935-37), this chapter places Pound and Zukofsky back into conversation to show how their competing ideologies influenced the selection of materials for their documentary poems.

Chapter 3, "From Verse to Screen: Muriel Rukeyser's Documentary Film Adaptations of 'The Book of the Dead' and the Rise and Fall of the Popular Front," examines Rukeyser's documentary poem and film projects on the Gauley Bridge, WV mining disaster in which hundreds of workers died of silicosis due to the negligence of Union Carbide. Although the relationship between Rukeyser's documentary poem "The Book of the Dead" (1938) and 1930s American documentary culture and production has received extensive critical examination, the scholarship overlooks Rukeyser's attempt to adapt her poem for documentary film. Using previously unexplored archival materials, this chapter discusses how Rukeyser worked on a film titled "Gauley Bridge" between 1938-1940, which incorporated the documentary materials used in "The Book of the Dead." Although Rukeyser never completed a full script for the film, her published and unpublished film sketches show how her treatment of the industrial tragedy responded to developments both within American documentary aesthetics and the changing national and international political climate during the Popular Front period. This chapter argues that the unexplored formal and political differences between "The Book of the Dead" and "Gauley Bridge," not only demonstrate an important shift in Rukeyser's aesthetics and

politics, but also mark a significant transition between the 1930s and 40s in American documentary film.

Finally, Chapter 4, “John Beecher’s Documentary Poetics of the New Deal,” investigates Beecher’s testimonial poems “And I Will Be Heard: Two Talks to the American People” (1940) and “After Eighty Years” (1943) and their relationship to the New Deal agencies that he worked for at the time. Beecher inflected his poetics with a strong conversational style, often delivering his subject matter through patterns of speech. As the great-grand nephew of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher, Beecher extended his family’s concerns with social justice and civil rights to bear upon issues of racial discrimination and the United States’ entry into the war in the 1940s. The two documentary poems under consideration both draw from Beecher’s work with the New Deal, incorporating his eyewitness accounts and personal experiences as a regional administrator for the Farm Security Administration and the Fair Employment Practices Committee into his poetry. In particular, Beecher’s documentary poems take up the issue of racial injustice in American defense industries and argue that such discrimination is markedly hypocritical within the context of fighting against the racist, totalitarian ideologies of the Axis powers. In doing so, Beecher’s documentary poems create antagonism between himself and his government employers, who at times have competing documentary images of racial integration within the war effort.

This project, then, will explore not only how the documentary motive of the 1930s and 40s definitively ran through American poetry, but also how documentary poetry makes a significant contribution to a critical understanding of the relationship between political activity and poetics between the Depression and World War 2. Additionally, it will show

that documentary is an important and fundamental facet of American modernist poetry, both in its formal aspects and social concerns.

Chapter 1

Joseph Kalar, *New Masses*, and the Development of Proletarian Documentary Poetry

Scholars have generally seen the start of Mike Gold's editorship of *New Masses* and his strong emphasis on workers' art as the first major push for proletarian literature in the United States.¹ Gold's tenure as the sole editor of the magazine from 1928-1930 marked a definitive departure in content and style from the *New Masses* of the previous two years. Although it had formed in May 1926 as a continuation of the old *Masses* and styled itself as a revolutionary magazine, the *New Masses* under Gold's influence increasingly identified its content as written for workers, by workers. To accomplish this, Gold developed a semi-regular set of worker-correspondents for the magazine – an innovation borrowed from Soviet journalism.² Through the John Reed Clubs he urged writers to incorporate themselves into various industries in order to “write like an insider, not like a bourgeois intellectual outsider” (“New Program,” 24). Additionally, Gold encouraged the organization of American workers' art groups, eventually forming a monthly Workers' Art section within the magazine in which different national and international groups could discuss political and cultural activities.³ Gold carefully revamped *New Masses* to have a documentary ethos, publishing prose, poetry, and letters

¹ For discussions on Gold's editorship of *New Masses* and his push for proletarian literature in the United States, see Aaron 209-13, Murphy 66-67, Homberger 128, and Peck 389-90. Wixson emphasizes how Gold's orientation toward proletarian literature influenced Mid-western radical poets such as Joseph Kalar (138-39). Marquardt (64) and Hemingway (13) discuss how Gold's revamping of *New Masses* developed new styles of proletarian print art and illustration.

² See Kenez 233-39 for a detailed account of worker-correspondents and their relationship to the development of the Soviet newspaper.

³ The Workers' Art section of *New Masses* gave space to both local, national, and internationally established workers groups. For example, for the first few months of the section, *New Masses* printed letters from the Workers' International Relief, the Bronx Hungarian Workers Club, the Workers Laboratory Theatre of New York, the Federal Workingmen's Singing Society, the Rebel Poets, and the John Reed Club.

that showed the lives and experiences of the American working class and the proletarian artist.

One of the more prominent of these writers was Joseph Kalar, a paper mill worker and poet from International Falls, Minnesota. Although primarily known for his frequently anthologized poem “Papermill,” Kalar prolifically wrote poetry for *New Masses* and other left literary magazines such as *Morada*, *Front*, and *The Left*, during the late 20s and early 30s.⁴ Kalar’s work documented the harsh and unforgiving lives of workers confronting the Depression through a prose-poetic form that he termed the “proletarian sketch.” In a letter to fellow poet Warren Huddlestone, looking back on his writing for the *New Masses* and other magazines, Kalar wrote: “the greatest art of the future, as far as the written word is concerned, will not be the short story or the novel or poetry, but the proletarian sketch . . . which can combine, as the short story never can, the elements of poetry and the novel” (*Protest* 155).⁵ His proletarian sketch closely resembled forms of documentary reportage and journalism, which Joseph Freeman described as the “characteristic literature” of the 1930s (Freeman 211). Freeman wrote in the influential anthology *Proletarian Literature in the United States* (1935), “reportage requires many of the same characteristics as the novel, the short story. It requires delineation of character, of locale, of atmosphere. And it must do these things swiftly, even more trenchantly. In brief, reportage is the presentation of a particular fact, a

⁴ Kalar’s work has recently been collected in *Papermill: Poems, 1927-35*, ed. Ted Genoways. Prior to Genoways’ edition, *Poet of Protest: Joseph Kalar*, edited by his son, Richard G. Kalar, was the only collection of Kalar’s work. In addition to presenting a wide range of Kalar’s poetry and sketches, *Poet of Protest* also contains correspondence between Kalar and Warren Huddlestone, a fellow Mid-western worker poet and writer.

⁵ Genoways argues that Joseph Kalar used his prose-poetic sketch in an effort to approach his material without the conventions of familiar literary genres. The result allowed him to quickly depict the scene and impart the frenetic experience of the event upon the reader, while avoiding both “the aesthetic distance implied by poetry or the plot demands of a traditionally constructed piece of fiction” (Genoways 7).

specific event, in a setting that aids the reader to experience the fact, the event” (212).

Kalar applied the basic concept of reportage to poetry by using poetic devices and strategies to report his material. In his sketches, he often extended his sentences through repetition and manipulation of punctuation, creating long flowing lines of poetic prose that drove one image into another. Kalar’s technique allowed him to juxtapose different situations, events, and places to build a panoramic picture of worker life, unemployment, and revolutionary activity in the United States.

Unfortunately, not only has the breadth of Kalar’s work largely been forgotten, but also the details of Gold’s proletarian experiment and its writers have fallen into obscurity. In part, this is due to the perceived political chaos within the magazine prior to its Communist alignment at the beginning of the 1930s. The Communist party did not have a strong presence within the United States in the late 20s and competed with various forms of socialism, trade unionism, and radicalism that found greater acceptance amongst the American left over the Party.⁶ Gold himself espoused a politically flexible attitude toward Communism, stressing what he saw as its revolutionary aspects: “I choose Communism because its discipline is not that of the barracks, or church hierarchy, but is creative self-discipline . . . Communism is something still unborn; we are asked to be daring experimenters, smashers of the old values, life-bringers” (“Three Schools” 24). Gold’s political stance, which demonstrated a lack of crucial knowledge about contemporary Soviet policies, has often led to the charge – both in his time and within the criticism – that his American proletarian experiment was a conceptual failure.⁷ Critics

⁶ See Ottanelli’s discussion of the CPUSA in the late 1920s and the political and cultural difficulties they had in establishing a strong base within the United States (43-44).

point to the *New Masses* and John Reed Club participation at the Kharkov Conference of Revolutionary Writers, held in Ukraine in November 1930, as the opening of a more orthodox and international Communist presence within the magazine, which brought an end to Gold's championing of the worker-writer.⁸

Yet despite the questionable relevance of Gold's proletarian push in an international Communist context, the outpouring of workers art within *New Masses* during Gold's editorship played a key role in developing a documentary aesthetic and style that would take hold throughout the 1930s in the United States. The proletarian phase of the *New Masses* fostered a documentary ethos that relied upon cultivating authentic working class experiences and immersing the worker-writer within the political and social environment being documented. Kalar's sketches are important because they provide a good source for the documentary style and aesthetic of American proletarian poetry. Additionally, his work also registers the tension within the American left as Communism became more prevalent and expected within revolutionary writing. The ideological shift towards consolidation and conformity within the *New Masses*, especially

⁷ Homberger and Aaron are the most vocal in this regard. Although sympathetic to Gold's proletarian push, Homberger writes: "Between 1928 and 1930 the *New Masses* was a Proletcult magazine. But such was economic 'reality' in capitalist America that it became abundantly clear that the magazine could not survive as it was. In hindsight it may have been following an interesting direction, but it was not particularly attractive to the typical readers of literary magazines" (128). Aaron takes a more critical tone toward the 1928-1930 period of *New Masses*: "The posturings of the proletarian literary tribunes, the wild claims, their poor taste, their ignorance, their sentimentalism and self-pity, and their primitiveness, their self-conscious toughness made them vulnerable to their better-read critics, who had no trouble demonstrating the absurdities of the 'Cult of the Clod' even before the proletarian vogue got under way" (212).

⁸ The 2nd International Conference of Revolutionary Writers was held in Kharkov from November 6-15, 1930. Organized by the newly established International Union of Revolutionary Writers, the conference gathered delegates from over twenty-five countries to discuss the formation and purpose of proletarian literature and the role it would play in promoting the Communist International. The American delegation was composed of writers, artists, and theorists from *New Masses* and the NY John Reed Club, including Mike Gold, Josephine Herbst, Harry Potamkin, and William Gropper.

in regard to proletarian writing and aesthetics, soon dissuaded Kalar from submitting work. He would later write Huddleston about the change within the magazine:

New Masses has a rather godawful conception of proletarian poetry, proletarian literature . . . [it] expects, curiously enough, not a proletarian mirroring in objectivity of facts, but wants, as well, a militancy, revolutionary verve, real or artificial, in the proletarians it writes about. I have a different conception of proletarian literature; I demand, first of all, truth, a mirror of all forms of proletarian experience. And it is artificial to expect a revolutionary orgasm in every proletarian erection (*Protest* 152-53).

For Kalar, the “revolutionary verve” that the Communist alignment brought to proletarian writing within *New Masses* distorted the process of recording the lives of workers and their diverse political and social responses to the Depression and a stuttering American capitalism. In his sketches he strives to build a documentary record of different working environments, types of industry and its specific workers, and the despair felt by the unemployed. The workers in his sketches often espouse revolutionary sentiments, but they do not necessary speak on behalf of the Communist International or Marxian political orthodoxy. Kalar’s prose-poetic proletarian sketches thus attempt to show the diverse politics of the American worker, rather than promote an ideologically correct way of perceiving the revolution of the proletariat.

In the inaugural issue of *New Masses* under his editorship, Mike Gold wrote an editorial that established both the tone and expectations for the new content being solicited by the magazine.⁹ Gold emphasized the importance of printing workers’ art and stressed the documentary ethos that he wished to build in the revamped *New Masses*. He

⁹ The start of Gold’s tenure as sole editor for *New Masses* was July 1928.

stated: “[E]very other magazine is written by professional writers. Every other magazine is always hunting for ‘big names.’ But we want the working men, women, and children of America to do most of the writing in the *New Masses*. The product may be crude, but it will be truth” (“Write for Us!” 2). Gold re-branded the purpose of the magazine to give a cross-section of worker life across the United States. The new *New Masses*, in Gold’s vision, would strike a difference from other magazines by having the majority of its content authored by unknown names – essentially, workers who become writers through documenting their own experiences. Gold exclaimed:

We want the raw materials of the workers’ art in the *New Masses*. If a proletarian genius arrives, it will be ready for him.

WE WANT TO PRINT:

Confessions—diaries—documents—

The concrete—

Letters from hoboes, peddlers, small town atheists, unfrocked clergymen
and schoolteachers—

Revelations by rebel chambermaids and night club waiters—

The sobs of driven stenographers—

The poetry of steel workers—

The wrath of miners—the laughter of sailors—

Strike stories, prison stories, work stories—

Stories by Communist, I.W.W. and other revolutionary workers (“Write for Us!”2).

Gold’s call for “raw materials” from a diverse set of occupations and political views reveals the ideological flexibility at the outset of the self-styled proletarian *New Masses*.

The request for submissions is addressed to blue- and white-collar workers, as well as those – waiters, peddlers, and rebel chambermaids – who would not necessarily be considered as being part of the revolutionary proletariat. Gold also asks for stories and accounts from different revolutionary standpoints rather than promoting one particular ideology.

Gold's initial acceptance of different revolutionary ideologies is particularly important in understanding the political grounding of his proletarian worker-writer experiment. Although he had previously visited the Soviet Union in 1925, and wished to establish a revolutionary cadre of workers across the United States, Gold framed the American revolutionary movement as an indigenous upwelling of political activity rather than an organized social movement.¹⁰ His heralding of a "proletarian genius" in 1928 drew less from contemporary Soviet plans for the comprehensive politicization of literature and more from Proletkult theories of fomenting revolutionary art through the native genius of the working class – theories which Lenin had proscribed eight years earlier.¹¹ Gold gave deference to the Soviet Union as the most powerful expression of revolution on the world stage, but included very little political theory when examining what he considered to be the American revolutionary scene. For example, in "Go Left, Young Writers!" Gold remarked that the American proletarian "is a Red but has few theories. It is all instinct with him. His writing is no conscious straining after proletarian

¹⁰ Gold visited the Soviet Union in 1925 and was greatly influenced by Mayakovsky's Futurist poetry and Meyerhold's Constructivist Theatre. These particular influences shaped his impressions of Communism and revolution. For example, in the second issue of *New Masses* (June 1926), Gold wrote that the "World Revolution" stemming from Soviet Russia "exfoliates a thousand bold new futurist thoughts in psychology, art, literature, economics, sex. It is a fresh world synthesis – the old one was killed in the war, and long live the new! ("Let It Be Really New! 20). For more on Gold's experiences in Russia see his 1925 essay on Meyerhold, "Theatre and Revolution," and Wald 43-44, 52.

¹¹ For more on the Proletkult, see Mally, *Culture of the Future*, and Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment*.

art, but the natural flower of his environment. He writes that way because it is the only way for him. His ‘spiritual’ attitudes are all mixed up with tenements, factories, lumber camps and steel mills, because that is his life.” Likewise, he described the nascent American workers’ art movement as having “no manifestos, it is not based on theories, it springs from life itself” (“Go Left” 16). For Gold, the documentary impulse animating the new proletarian phase of *New Masses* erupted from a burgeoning class-consciousness that shaped itself against the failures of capitalism and inequities of labor. Workers’ experience and their articulation of the conditions within their respective industries were tantamount to revolutionary activity. Their daily lives, according to Gold, were the essential fodder for the establishment of workers’ documentary art.

Joseph Kalar’s career as a proletarian poet and worker-correspondent began with a letter he sent to *New Masses* to mark Gold’s revamping of the magazine. The new tone of the magazine and its call for workers’ art appealed to Kalar: in the letter printed in the July 1928 issue he wrote, “if *New Masses* is to be the voice of the low-brow, failure, rebel, boy worker, ditch digger, I am yours to a cinder” (“Letter” 2). He became part of Gold’s growing network of semi-regular correspondents who contributed documentary prose and poetry in an effort to develop an American proletarian literature. *New Masses* served as an important hub for writers, poets, and editors of radical little magazines across the Midwest and Western United States. Describing these various writers, Kalar wrote that, “Thru *New Masses* I became acquainted with a number of fine fellows, Jack Conroy, H.H. Lewis, Walt Carmon, and others. Norman Macleod, who edited *Palo Verde*, was also a fine friend, and his magazine *Morada* also helped (some of my best

stuff appeared in *Morada*)” (*Protest* 147).¹² Under Gold’s editorship, *New Masses* brought together different regional perspectives on the Depression, rising unemployment, and the political activities of workers. Sections in the magazine such as “Letters from America” and “Proletarian Snapshots” encouraged workers from across the United States to contribute material that described the working conditions in their respective industries.

Kalar adopted the role of worker-correspondent, announcing to *New Masses* in July 1928 that he was “cutting loose” from the International Falls paper mills to travel across “these delectable states” for new material (“Letter” 2). His travels, which took him through South Dakota, Wyoming, and most of the northwestern United States, provided him with material for a series of prose-poetic sketches that portrayed workers’ lives and the diverse forms of radicalism that constructed his sense of American proletarian culture. Kalar’s first piece for *New Masses* appeared in the September 1928 issue. Titled “Proletarian Geography,” the sketch gave an overview of different industries and their respective workforces through Minnesota, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Kalar’s geographical approach involved showing the dynamic relationship between workers, their culture, and the land that they transform through industry. In the first section, devoted to the Mesabi Iron Ore Range in northeastern Minnesota, Kalar depicts how the social environment of the camps and material residue of the mines shapes the workers coming from different towns in the state:

¹² For more on Jack Conroy, H.H. Lewis, Walt Carmon, and Norman Macleod, see Douglas Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America*. Jack Conroy was a prominent organizer of Mid-western proletarian writers and poets, and editor of *Rebel Poet* and *Anvil*. H.H. Lewis wrote proletarian verse in favor of the Soviet Union and is probably best known for his satirical verse. Walt Carmon was the managing editor for *New Masses* along with Mike Gold in the late 1920s. Norman Macleod wrote poetry for *New Masses* and was editor of the short-lived magazine *Morada*.

Eveleth, Chisholm, Virginia, Buhl, Mountain Iron, a patchwork quilt, little slabs of Bohunks, Wops, Swedes, Russians, Finns, Yanks, burrowing deep into the soil, clawing at the entrails of the earth, bringing up blood red riches. At twilight they emerge from the dismal depths, stinking the stench of iron ore, blinking like owls in the sudden light . . . People, fat and complacent, white-collared workers, and even factory workers, will tell you the miners are no good, booking, fighting, dreaming, and sentimental. It is true. Many sudden knife-thrusts, virulent blasphemies, furious brawls, but underneath it all the color and rhythm of an old civilization (10).

Amidst the dangerous, degrading working conditions, Kalar reveals an unbroken mining culture at Mesabi – the color and rhythm of an old civilization – formed from different nationalities and ethnicities. The bloody orange-red of the iron ore transforms their work into an act of violence against the land, while the economic gains from the mine are subsequently seen as tainted with blood. The miners and their harsh lives play a fundamental role in the ongoing violent transformation of the landscape of Minnesota. These geological changes, argues Kalar, are the bedrock of the social geography of the multiethnic proletariat at Mesabi. He writes: “Someday the miners will do more than growl, shake themselves and mutter. The Nordics here still remember the great wobbly strike; still remember the sudden anger and determination of the despised hunger retched Wops, Bohunks, Finns and Swedes” (10).¹³ Kalar racially charges the latent violence beneath the turbulent situation in Mesabi, showing both the division and solidarity within the ethnic groups working in the camps. “Proletarian Geography” documents a dynamic

¹³ The “great wobbly strike” refers to the Mesabi Iron Range Strike of 1916, which was supported and organized by the I.W.W. For more on the strike see Neil Betten, “Riot, Revolution, Repression in the Iron Range Strike of 1916.”

relationship between the land, its transformation, and the various ethnic groups of miners that form a proletarian geography. Kalar presents the concept of proletarianism as a form of multinational and multiethnic solidarity as a response to the poor living conditions and social pressures placed upon the miners. The mining industry and its modes of operation, according to Kalar, create an environment that produces growing resentment and violence: all of which contributes to the unrest and organization exhibited by the iron miners.

The diverse cultural approach that Kalar takes toward the American proletariat in “Proletarian Geography” not only includes the “Wops, Bohunks, Finns, and Swedes,” but also incorporates traditions of the outlaw and roughneck central to the American West and the Badlands. In “The Black Hills” section of the sketch Kalar argues that both the geography of the desolate landscape of South Dakota and the cultural memory of the outlaw feed into the concept of a distinctly American proletarianism. The connection between geography and culture is similar to the work done in the “Mesabi” section.

Kalar writes:

In the Black Hills proper one can find Van Wyck Brooks’ much lamented “usable past.” Deadwood still flourishes the scarlet memory of Preacher Smith, Wild Bill Hikock, Poker Alice, and Calamity Jane. It dangles this virile bait before the effeminate tourist of the east. Calamity Jane, with the spirit of a wildcat and the mannerisms of a heman, is buried here, as are Wild Bill “champeen pistle shot,” and Preacher Smith, a rootin’ tootin’ guntotin’ evangelist and son of Arizony (10).

Kalar’s use of Brooks’ “usable past” is especially interesting given the frequent divides argued for by contemporary revolutionary writers between American literature and the

newness of revolutionary proletarian literature.¹⁴ In his 1918 seminal essay “On Creating a Usable Past,” Brooks’ argues that in order to rejuvenate contemporary American literature, a new generation of writers and professors must re-evaluate the literary and historical past of the United States. According to Brooks, the commercial success of regionalism and local colorist literature, especially after the Civil War, reveals the stagnation of the creative impulse in both the creation of new literature and literary theoretical approaches to American literature.¹⁵ Brooks writes, “To approach our literature from the point of view not of the successful fact but of the creative impulse, is to throw it into an entirely new focus. What emerges then is the desire, the aspiration, the struggle, the tentative endeavor, and the appalling obstacles our life has placed before them. Which immediately casts over the spiritual history of America a significance that, for us, it has never had before” (225).

Kalar employs Brooks’ usable past to argue that American proletarian culture not only draws from the lives and experiences of factory workers and iron ore miners, but it should also incorporate the heroes of the Badlands as part of its cultural geography. In doing so, he also makes a case for understanding revolutionary workers’ culture as a part of the larger development of American cultural history. Although the outlaws and gunslingers of Deadwood and the Badlands are not themselves depicted as proletarians, Kalar suggests that the stark, desolate environment they lived within reflects the

¹⁴ See in particular Gold’s “Hemingway – White Collar Poet” (March 1928) in which he argues for a sharp divide between “liberal” and “bourgeois” writers, in which group he includes Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, H.L. Mencken, and Sinclair Lewis, and the new generation of American revolutionary writers.

¹⁵ Concerning American regionalist writing, Brooks argues that, “[i]t has chiefly been a literature of exploitation, the counterpart of our American life. From Irving and Longfellow and Cooper and Bryant, who exploited the legendary and scenic environment of our grandfathers, through the local colorists, who dominated our fiction during the intermediate age and to whom the American people accounted for artistic righteousness their own provincial quaintnesses” (221-222).

hardships currently existing in the late 1920s: “one suddenly comes upon the bleak desolate hills of the grazing region. There is nothing here to impress the bum with a sense of prosperity; one can forget that this is the era of the Calvin Coolidge Golden Calf. Unpainted shacks, miles apart, predominates. In a valley, sheltered from the bitter winds that howl derision and futility in the winter, you see a shack, a small fence, a well” (10). The landscape that once produced Wild West heroes such as Wild Bill and Calamity Jane now describe the privation and misery common amongst American workers. The inclusion of the outlaws and gunslingers into his proletarian geography transforms and provides new contexts for the development of the American West. In the “Wyoming” section of “Proletarian Geography,” Kalar remarks that, “Industrialism is slowly being ushered in by cowboys smeared with oil. The anarchistic freedom of the plains is being smothered by belching oil” (10). The image of the oil-smeared cowboy graphically depicts the growing reach of material industry across the West and the changing nature of work and employment in those areas. Former heroes of the 19th century American West – the cowboy, the outlaw, and the gunslinger – must find new cultural contexts within the creeping industrialism of the 20th century. Kalar ultimately argues in “Proletarian Geography” that the pressure of industrial capitalism creates a proletarian culture specific to the diverse cultural past of the United States.

Kalar’s sketches also documented the diverse political views held by what he identified as the American proletariat. In “Skidway Seattle,” published in the December 1928 *New Masses*, Kalar gives his impressions of the skid row district in Seattle.¹⁶ He

¹⁶ The term “skidway” derives from the logging industry, in which heavier pieces of lumber were skidded across paths and roads leading from the outer edge of the logging site. The worker camps set up alongside the skid ways became known as “skid rows.” The derogatory use of the term came to mean any section of

describes the skidway as “the main proletarian street of Seattle, lined with cheap rooming houses, speakeasies, missions halls, unemployment agencies, etc. Every night radicals make soapbox speeches at the corners” (18). Kalar portrays the charged mass of humanity living and traveling through the skidway and how the various political and social views held by its inhabitants interact with one another. “Skidway Seattle” is a remarkable document for its flexible and unorthodox approach in showing the value of the competing ideologies at the crux of proletarian activity. Revolutionary politics, in Kalar’s documentary sketch, emerges as a contest between different parties, groups, and unions all fighting for the largest audience of listeners. In the opening section “Where is the Idea,” Kalar describes the different groups living on the skidway and attempts to sketch a political common ground between them:

There is no single standard and no single class. Sneering cynics rub shoulders with Utopian dreamers; hardheaded wobblies touch hands with A. F. of L. adherents; vociferous atheists smile amiably on Mormons and Holyrollers . . . The Communists dominate the crowds; the wobblies dominate the crowd. Masses of men detach themselves from other masses of men and move like a black wave to join other masses of men. The idea is caught here somewhere . . . Crowds pour back and forth searching for the idea. Capitalism? Capitalism is not the idea. Liberalism? Liberalism is not the idea. Communism? Communism might be the idea. I. W. W. ism? They do not know. Anarchism? Hell no, anarchism is not the idea (18).

a city that catered primarily to migrant workers, transients, hoboes, and lower income residents. For more see Peter Tamony, “Skidroad’s Skidway to Inner City.”

Similar to “Proletarian Geography,” in which immigrant miners culture merged with the folk heroes of the American West, Kalar presents proletarian activity in “Skidway Seattle” as the outcome of different ideologies and cultures meeting, merging, and clashing. His presentation of proletarian culture sharply differs from later conceptions of found in *New Masses*, especially in its doubt of the efficacy of Communism as the sole guardian of revolutionary political activity. Kalar’s fundamental question, “where is the idea,” positions proletarianism as erupting from a groundswell of indigenous political activity rather than modeled from theory. In this sense, Kalar promotes Gold’s romantic idea of the native genius of the proletarian worker. Kalar states in “Skidway” that, “The idea is a live thing . . . The idea is a vital force. The idea of the idea is a living breathing force. A welter of ideas, inchoate, formless: disillusion upon disillusion. Cynicism rampant. Idealism slowly conquering. One thing certain: SOMETHING MUST BE DONE” (18). The revolutionary atmosphere of the Seattle skidway presents optimism and disillusionment. Kalar’s documentary sketch does not idealize revolutionary activity, but rather attempts to show the gritty reality of political competition.

Kalar presents the political competition by depicting opposing soapbox personas in the streets of the skidway. In the section “Portrait in Red,” Kalar records the activities and speeches of George Hanrahan, a member of the Communist Party of Washington State.¹⁷ In particular, Hanrahan speaks of the technological innovation that the Soviets displayed in rescuing Umberto Nobile and the crew of the airship *Italia* after they crashed over the North Pole in May 1928. Nobile, an aeronautical engineer, had designed and

¹⁷ For more on George Hanrahan see Hamilton Fish Jr., *Investigation of communist propaganda*, in which Hanrahan is questioned in front of the committee on his activities within the Washington State Party. Also, for more information on the history of the Communist Party in Washington State, see *Communism in Washington State: History and Memory* at <http://depts.washington.edu/labhist/cpproject/index.shtml>

built the airship for a series of expeditions to the North Pole. The crash sparked an international rescue effort, with different countries sending planes, dog sled teams, and a variety of icebreaking ships to save the stranded crew. After 48 days, the Soviet icebreaker ship, the *Krassin*, was able to extricate the survivors from the ice.¹⁸ Kalar writes that for Hanrahan, “the exploit of the *Krassin* symbolizes the drive and will of the world proletariat slowly grasping the IDEA” (18). Furthermore, according to Hanrahan, the actions of the Soviet Union display their political will through the quick application of their technological innovations to solve international crises. Kalar voices Hanrahan:

Now you take these capitalist countries. What did they do [in response to the crash]? Did they try to do anything? They fell to their knees and prayed to God to save the *Italia* expedition. The pope calls on the faithful to pray. But God was busy, reading the ‘Seattle Star,’ I guess. What did these here terrible Bolshies do? They threw him into the garbage can and did something. They went ahead with action and the *Krassin* and did something. Action! They want action! Only action will build the new world! (18)

Yet while he emphasizes Hanrahan’s connection with the Communist Party, stating that, “when George speaks of the Soviet Union he does so with passionate intensity,” Kalar also carefully notes that Communism is but one part of the still growing proletarian movement in Seattle. He argues that Hanrahan does not place himself in the role of an ideologue: “George to George is not a hero. George to George is but an infinitesimal unit in the as yet embryonic pattern of the revolutionary movement” (18). Similar to “Proletarian Geography,” Kalar depicts a proletarian politics that is still emerging and

¹⁸ For more information about the rescue attempts, see Robert E. Martin’s article “Armored Ships Win Thrilling Battles with Polar Ice” in *Popular Science Monthly* (Jan. 1929). For a detailed account of Nobile and the *Italia*, see Wilbur Cross, *Disaster at the Pole*.

borrowing from different political and cultural groups. As he notes in “Where is the Idea?” the revolutionary spirit of the skidway grows from the interaction between Communists, socialists, wobblies, and other numerous groups. By stating that the left revolutionary exists in an “embryonic pattern” Kalar suggests that the existing political groups on the skidway, including the Communists, are the beginning of a still lengthy development.

The proletarian sketch form that Kalar developed with “Proletarian Geography” and “Skidway Seattle” increasingly grew more poetic as he published more pieces in *New Masses*. In addition to documenting the proletarian communities and city districts that he encountered during his travels in 1928, Kalar also wrote about the itinerant and semi-permanent workforces that material industries relied upon for cheap labor. These sketches attempted to show the gritty reality for different groups of workers, often resorting to vivid and descriptive language. Kalar’s “Teamsters,” published in the July 1929 *New Masses*, depicted the rough lives of freight transportation workers, who move from camp to camp as they travel:

Teamsters stink of horses: pungently of equine flatulence: of pine sweating perfumed pitch under the persuasive tongue of a blistering sun: damply of river slime. The scaling shack is heavy with the smell of teamsters: of tobacco juice frying under the steampipe: of cigarets with brown guts drooping raggedly out of frayed ends: of grey tobacco ash. Pools of phlegm gleam whitely under the glare of the electric light. Bits of horsedung stamped loose from boots, join juice of tobacco ash and phlegm (7).

Kalar continues his focus on documenting the dynamic relationship between the worker and his environment – showing how the very elements of transportation, such as the horses and the landscapes they travel through, embed their characteristic materials into the smell of the teamster. “Teamsters” also marks a change in style from “Proletarian Geography” and “Seattle Skidway,” in its poetic approach towards its material. Kalar’s use of colons allows him to develop associative relationships between different images and attributes of the teamsters, presenting the reader with a more dynamic portrait. He describes topics of conversation between the teamsters in a terse, direct way, emphasizing the roughness of their speech: “Words with naked directness of an uppercut: brutal slimy words: brutal laughing words . . . Sex. Drink. Strikes. The World War. Horses . . . Teamsters talk of days spent in lousy camps in zero weather: damp stinking socks hanging streaming over a redhot stove: air so saturated with stink it made hair grow on one’s chest” (7). Kalar’s poetic use of colons results in the continuous modifying of one topic of conversation by another as if in a stream of conversation. The effect creates a sense of community within the teamsters. Although they are on the road most of the year, the camps and the steady stream of conversation allow them to create a shared history and a sense of place.

Kalar’s focus on specific industries and workforces continued in the following issue of *New Masses* with “A Gypo in Sawdust.” Unlike “Teamsters,” which depicted some degree of continuity and community within their itinerant work, “A Gypo in Sawdust” describes how the piecemeal and contract work at the sawmill affects the workers physically and psychologically. Kalar worked in the lumber factories in International Falls and saw first hand how the use of unskilled, cheap labor destroyed the

morale and temperament of the workers. In particular Kalar focuses on the gypo system, in which the lumber company hands out contracts to independent loggers for loading, stacking, and cutting work.¹⁹ In “A Gypo in Sawdust,” Kalar describes how the piecemeal work of a gypo creates a manic quality in his attitude towards work:

As damp aromatic loads of whitepine, norway, spruce, tamarack, poplar, pulled into the lumberyard by sweating, puffing, flatulating horses pounded on tense gargantuan rumps by cursing teamsters, pass him, he smiles with the imbecile expression of a man winning on the stockmarket, with the blatant joy of a bookkeeper getting a cigar from the boss. Years of piecework have turned him into a cursing vicious automaton, a monomaniac whose night in bed are made wetly hideous by nightmares of lumberpiles toppling into allies with a madness of flying planks, of skyhigh piling machines remorselessly dropping huge planks on his head, bearing lumber to him so rapidly he cannot take it away (14).

In his continuing examination of the relationship between the worker and his environment, Kalar depicts the psychological derangement that occurs for the gypo living from lumber beam to lumber beam. Since his future hinges upon whether he will be able to receive lumber to cut, and whether he can out perform other independently contracted laborers, Kalar argues that work becomes the gypo’s single-minded focus. Kalar writes: “life hangs in the balance on the number of feet the scaler has allowed him” (14). The process of piecemeal work eventually breaks the gypo worker down, both mentally and physically. Kalar includes the conversation of the day laborers in his documentary sketch to emphasize the exacting toll: “‘You take a gypo,’ the dayworkers say, ‘you take a gypo

¹⁹ For more information on the gypo system of labor in the early 20th century logging industry, see Charlotte Todes, *Labor and Lumber*.

now. Two or three years they gypo and then they aint [sic] human no more. They get lumber hungry. They never get enough lumber. Look at the way they tear into the loads, like a mad bull tearing the guts out of a dog” (14). Through the words of the dayworkers, Kalar shows the gradual dehumanization of the gypo worker. Essentially, the gypo wears himself down until he becomes thoroughly mechanized, living according to the supply of lumber moving through the sawmill.

By the time the magazine had published “A Gypo in Sawdust,” Kalar had been writing documentary sketches for Gold’s proletarian *New Masses* for a little over a year. However, despite Kalar’s rate of publication and support from Gold and the magazine, he felt that *New Masses* was not fulfilling the proletarian vision that it had announced a year prior. In a letter published in the September 1929 issue, Kalar exclaimed that the *New Masses* “is publishing far too many manifestos on the desirability and significance of proletarian art – thus dissipating energies and space which probably could have been more profitably used in actually *creating* proletarian art, or, to put it more humbly, a proletarian mirroring of life” (22). Furthermore, Kalar argued that the magazine should strive towards establishing a greater audience amongst workers by publishing material written by workers and proletarians. Kalar states:

What I would like to see is a *New Masses* that would be read by lumberjacks, hoboes, miners, clerks, sectionhands, machinists, harvesthands, waiters – the people should count more to us than paid scribblers . . . I have found that workers like to read a good snappy article on their line of work – it is like an experience lived over again for them to come upon slang terms peculiar to their occupation. Workers don’t write often, they write because if the didn’t they would explode . . .

It is time that we knew who we wanted to read this magazine – embryo artists, or the people who sweat. Is this to be a workers magazine or a potential writers magazine (22).

Kalar's focus on workers and their relationship to their environment not only reflected Gold's earlier view of the proletariat as emanating from the native genius of the worker, but also highlighted the tension between working culture and more pronounced forms of revolutionary aesthetics and ideology that would become prominent in the later *New Masses*. In particular, the formation of the Workers' Art section in the magazine and the New York John Reed Club towards the end of 1929 introduced more radical political writings and culture into *New Masses*. The Workers' International Relief regularly sent letters that were published in the Workers' Art section that promoted organized workers' clubs and activities in order "to provide for the worker and his children a field of activity which will encompass the sorely needed educational, dramatic, artistic and physical culture of a proletarian nature" (W.I.R. 21).²⁰ Likewise, the official announcement of the first John Reed Club in the November 1929 issue of *New Masses* stated that the organization had taken steps "to make immediate contact with existing proletarian groups of writers, artists and all creative workers in France, Germany, Russia and Japan," implicitly stating that not only would there be a global cross-pollination of revolutionary ideas and writing through the JRC, but also that the theories and organized proletarian practices of countries such as Germany and Russia would be discussed within the United States as a result of the group.

²⁰ Originally organized in Berlin by Willi Munzenberg in 1921 to provide aid to famine and drought-stricken areas in Russia, the Workers International Relief eventually grew to support workers cultural activities, strikes and protests, and aid missions in Western Europe and the United States. For more on the W.I.R. see Gross, *Willi Munzenberg: A Political Biography*.

Kalar soon clashed with the direction and vision of Mike Gold and the John Reed Clubs over their approach towards proletarian documentary writing and workers' art. In "A New Program for Writers," Gold advocated a program in which John Reed Club members and revolutionary writers embedded themselves in various industries in order to write authoritatively about the factories and the politics of the workers. Gold suggested that, "every writer in the group attach himself to one of the industries. That he spend the next few years in and out of the industry, studying it from every angle, making himself an expert in it, so that when he writes of it he will write like an insider, not like a bourgeois intellectual observer." Additionally, Gold named writers who could already fit this agenda, stating that "Joe Kalar has been a lumber worker for years," indicating that perhaps he would be interested in participating in this new worker-writer program (21). The purpose of Gold's program for the JRC and revolutionary writers was to create a network of "industrial correspondents" who could pool their documentary materials to build a national picture of the working class and the conditions under which they worked.

Gold's "new program," however, did not sit well with Kalar. Although he had a lumber worker for years, and wrote poems and poetic sketches about his experiences, Kalar felt that Gold's concept of staffing industries with proletarian writers was misguided and ultimately would not produce the results he intended. His response letter to Gold's program was published in *New Masses*. In the letter, Kalar wrote that full shifts of factory labor would "hardly give one the enthusiasm to write about it – for ten hours irons out even the bitterness and hate – leaving only an arid apathy and a desire for 'escape'" (21). The relentless grind of industrial factory work, in effect, would numb the proletarian writer's ability to precisely document his surroundings and crush the critical

distance necessary to collect one's thoughts and perceptions of the job. Instead, Kalar argued that rather than being fixed to an industry, the proletarian writer articulates a process by which industrial capitalism produces a class of workers defined by temporary and infrequent labor opportunities. Kalar writes:

[A]ll phases of proletarian life are the province of the proletarian writer, and no proletarian can embrace his job as tho it were his mistress or his wife . . .

Anyway: today I am a lumberworker, tomorrow the boss may discover the sarcastic opinion I have of him, and I'll be something other than a lumberworker. And so on. We work because we have to, not because we love our jobs – today a lumberworker, tomorrow a ditchdigger, and insurance agent, a clerk, a papermill worker, or gandydancer – we take what we can get (22).

For Kalar, the process by which American workers became proletarianized occurs through their simultaneous deracination and politicization. The proletarian class forms as a result of the widespread use of cheap, unskilled, and expendable labor. Workers subjected to such conditions, Kalar argues, do not form strong attachments to their respective industries. Rather, the common ground they share exhibits itself in their rootlessness and ability to travel from field to field. For Kalar, the proletarianized worker reflects the politicization of this rootlessness: an understanding that the same forces that deracinate the worker can also lead to the eventual consolidation of the rootless worker into a single class. Kalar's documentary sketches follow his views on the proletarian worker insofar as he depicts a variety of different jobs, industries, and political views that operate in the wake of the collapsing American industrial economy.

As the Depression worsened following the initial stock market crash, Kalar's poetic sketches began to focus on the unemployed. Similar to "Proletarian Geography," Kalar took a sweeping view of unemployment, showing different cities and groups of workers who were currently out of work. In his sketch "Unemployment," published in Norman Macleod's short-lived magazine *Morada*, Kalar depicts the experience of being unemployed in several major American cities, including Chicago and Cleveland.²¹ Kalar funnels the mass experience of unemployment in the sketch through a single forlorn worker who has just been laid off. Kalar's writing in "Unemployment" exhibits a strong, developed poetry, relying heavily on sustained sentences and a stream-of-consciousness approach toward his surroundings. The poetic character of the sketch allows Kalar to compound image after image and provide a rich account of the fear of losing one's job.

Kalar writes:

It was done always so simply. Words walking through thin lips and there tomorrow a man stands on streetcorners futile cold and hungry fingers of his loneliness reaching out to touch people hurrying by him with an icy stare, a dry fog settling down upon him o suddenly most surely a little brown dog wagging his tail asking for handpats aching with hunger wincing at thoughts of tomorrows endlessly on parade (56).

Kalar describes the ease with which a worker can become unemployed. The words of the factory boss are all that separates the employed from the cold and brutal reality of the streets. Once unemployed, the worker becomes an outcast and shunned by society, relegated to the status of a stray animal dependent upon chance bits of food. In

²¹ Norman Macleod's *Morada* lasted for four issues between 1929-1931. Publication of the magazine was sporadic and featured English language writers as well as French and German.

“Unemployment,” Kalar shows that this experience of being out of work and at the whims of an unforgiving society is widespread throughout the United States. He juxtaposes the initial sense of isolation felt by the unidentified worker with a similar scene in Chicago: “Or Chicago. Waves smashing into splinters of green on the lakefront a cold breeze dancing over the lake the zoom of traffic roar of Levated beating upon him sitting on a park bench watching lovers disappear into the shrubbery and he sitting there looking stupidly numb with cold. God (56).” Likewise, Kalar sketches a scene of an unemployed drifter in Cincinnati:

Or Cincinnati. And a small Jew eyeing him coldly sneering, his eyes walking over frayed edges of his overcoat frayed trousers wrinkled tie walking coldly over his face and hair cut not quite in the latest fashion and God how his soul whimpered and snuffled and crept into the dark kennels of despair to turn crouching hate flowering darkly within him hands longing to grasp the sleek throat throttling until sharkboards wantads breadlines flopjoints crumbled into dust and were one with the dark earth and beauty flowered over all the land (57).

Kalar not only wishes to show the physical affects of unemployment, in terms of being hungry and increasingly isolated, but also depicts the psychology of the unemployed as well. He presents the flowering hate felt by the worker as a response to the seemingly unsolvable problem of unemployment, poverty, and the lack of any charitable response that could alleviate the sufferings of the unemployed. The feeling of despair, catalogued by Kalar, threatens to consume the worker and prompts his call for the end of society itself. The anger and despair push the unemployed to the limit of their tolerance for physical and psychological pain: “beating upon him pushing him pushing him pushing

pushing right through him beyond him beyond civilization and policemen and scabs and hunger and words walking through thinfat lips beyond a tomorrow that is but the crack of a pistol” (57). His frenetic prose-poetics conveys the immense pressure upon the unemployed. Kalar ultimately shows that those who are out of work are not given a chance to occupy a meaningful role in American society and thus find themselves on the outside.

In addition to publishing “Unemployed,” Macleod’s *Morada* also featured an important and wide-ranging epistolary showdown between Ezra Pound and Joseph Kalar over the concept of the American proletariat. In late 1930, Pound argued in his letter to Macleod and the magazine that the use of the term “proletariat” to describe workers and revolutionary politics within the United States was a “degradation of language.” Pound stated: “I don’t think the loose use of the words ‘proletarian’; ‘proletariat’ etc. does any good either to the decreasing section of the public or to letters. The word proletariat properly applies to that part of the population engaged solely in reproduction of the human species” (90). Pound took aim at the lack of theory involved in determining proletarian art and writing, arguing that American intellectuals on the left “utterly refuse to examine or describe either the actual working conditions of American society or the varieties of humanity actively engaged in maintaining, altering, and degrading that society” (91). Essentially, Pound did not see Communism as having the necessary support or the proper cultural ground to become a political force within the United States.

Interestingly enough, Kalar’s response to Pound’s accusations did not attempt to defend the lack of theory involved in determining proletarian literature. He conceded that the theoretical approach towards defining the proletariat was not strong, writing that, “the

influence of communism on American literature is negligible – if by communism we mean political and economic ideology exclusively” (91). Kalar, however, still countered Pound in arguing for a proletarian movement within the working class and unemployed within the United States. Similar to Mike Gold’s assessment of the native genius of the American proletarian writer, Kalar wrote:

There are writers to whom the proletarian art of the future is a theory: there will be others to whom theory will be of no great concern, but who will advance and perfect a proletarian art because of the very force of events, because it would be impossible for them to write in any other way, who will be given the guts to perform a difficult task by the evolution of art and capitalism, in brief just as the age produces a Lenin, so will the age produce the proletarian artist (91).

For Kalar, American proletarian and revolutionary writing did not depend on a precise formulation of theory or a strict adherence to a specific political ideology. Rather, the events that marked the existence of the American worker in the late 20s and early 30s – the worsening depression, unemployment, and increasing politicization – all contributed to the fertile ground for a growing proletarian outlook amongst workers in the United States. Kalar’s poetic sketches attempt to document this phenomenon in which a diverse set of workers forms a proletarian geography, incorporating various ethnicities, political views and ideologies, and histories as a result of the social pressures of industrial capitalism. The proletarian artist, according to Kalar, emerges from this conjunction of different historical and political forces, having internalized the proletarian way of life.

However, Kalar’s formulation of proletarianism, evinced in his response to Pound and his sketches, found itself at odds with the increasing influence of Communist

ideology amongst American revolutionary artists and writers. Toward the end of 1930, the Workers' Art section in *New Masses* contained more letters and writings that publicized the activities of Communist workers groups such as the Workers' International Relief and International Labor Defense.²² *New Masses* also promoted literary connections between itself and other international revolutionary workers' magazines by printing letters from foreign editorial boards. An important example of this is the printing of a letter from the Berlin based *International Tribune*, in which the editor of the magazine advocates a closer relationship between *New Masses*, the American revolutionary literature, and the burgeoning global proletarian movement:

Although new, [the *International Tribune*] has made close connections with groups and individuals in the U.S.S.R., France, Holland, Lettland, Czecko-Slovakia, Bulgaria and Germany, and beginnings towards such in Japan, Mexico, India, Greece, Italy, Hungary, Denmark. From these lands it receives literary materials, reports, periodicals, etc. and stimulates, in its turn, debates, discussions, theatrical productions, and the exchange of materials for publication among the various lands. . . Recognizing the *New Masses* as the effectual medium for contact with the revolutionary groups of the U.S.A., the *International Tribune* would like to establish such an exchange-relationship through the *New Masses* in America. . . To balance the exchange, the *Tribune* urges the American friends to occupy themselves more extensively with the revolutionary literature of Europe (20).

The push within *New Masses* to maintain close connections with revolutionary writers groups in Europe and Asia affected the magazine's relationship to the Communist

²² The International Labor Defense was an American legal defense organization associated with the CPUSA and led by William L. Patterson. The organization notably defended Sacco and Vanzetti, as well as the Scottsboro boys. For more on the ILD see Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism*.

International and its vision of proletarian art. The *New Masses* and the John Reed Club were both invited to send delegates to the Second International Conference of Revolutionary Writers held at Kharkov in November 1930. The conference was an attempt to consolidate and give direction to proletarian and revolutionary writers groups from across the world. The International Union of Revolutionary Writers, which had been recently established to conduct the proceedings, recognized both *New Masses* and the John Reed Club as the American representatives for proletarian literature in the United States.²³ The IURW's recognition of the magazine and the JRC was instrumental in changing the direction and viewpoint of American proletarian literature within *New Masses*. In contrast to Kalar's sketches, in which Communism was a mere part of the American revolutionary political picture, the American delegation to the Kharkov conference exclaimed that "The tremendous sharpening of class antagonisms in the United States, the imminent danger of imperialist war, especially of war against the Soviet Union, place in the foreground the necessity of building up in the United States a powerful mass proletarian-revolutionary cultural movement that will enable us to cope with the great tasks that face us" ("2nd Int'l" 121).

The statement of the American delegation to the Conference demonstrates a dramatic shift from earlier models of proletarian literature that had been advocated by Gold and Kalar in *New Masses*. Instead of a proletarian movement that would emerge from the political and social forces that shaped the American workforce, free from theoretical underpinnings, the new vision of "a powerful mass proletarian-revolutionary cultural movement" became a defensive posture against perceived capitalist aggression

²³ The reports, resolutions, and debates of the Kharkov Conference were printed as a special issue of *Literature of the World Revolution* (Special Number, 1931).

and as a means to defend the Soviet Union from existential threats. By placing the defense of the Soviet Union as one of the key objectives of the proletarian writer, the American delegation encouraged proletarian writing to endorse and incorporate Communist ideology and politics into its view of the working class and their struggles against capitalist practices. Mike Gold, in an especially striking endorsement and contrast from his previous position on proletarian art, proclaimed at the conference:

The duty of every revolutionary writer at the present hour is to defend the Soviet Union against the imperialists. He must be tireless in exposing the lies uttered daily against the socialist fatherland, and when war comes he must go on exposing these lies. A threat against the Soviet Union is a threat against everything precious developing in the world today . . . a threat against every modern writer, be he revolutionist or liberal. I speak no empty rhetoric when I say this; and I know as the lessons of October spread in America, spreading in all the colleges and working-class organizations as they are, there will wider recognition of this (“2nd Int’l” 211).

Gold’s new attitude and approach to proletarian writing had serious consequences for the publication of documentary poetry written by Joseph Kalar. The Kharkov Conference, the increasing influence of Communist ideology, and the new sets of obligations placed upon the revolutionary writer made it difficult for Kalar to submit work to the magazine. Within a year of the conference, Kalar’s prose-poetic sketches, with their emphasis on examining the diverse political strains of the American working class, were no longer a feature of the magazine.

One of Kalar's last sketches to be printed in *New Masses* anticipated this change in political attitude. "Unemployment Anthology: Notes from Minnesota," resembled Kalar's earlier work in showing different facets of joblessness amongst factory workers. He relates the feelings of hatred, antipathy, and despair espoused by the unemployment, and shows how these powerful psychological reactions can lead to depression and, in some cases, suicide. Yet Kalar does not offer revolutionary activity as a solution to the problems of the unemployed. In the final section of "Unemployment Anthology," Kalar critiques the escalating revolutionary rhetoric spoken by left-leaning intellectuals:

Revolution, "war between the rich class and the poor class," is an idea that sprouts like corn in fertile freshly plowed soil. The idea is immature, confused, bewildered, bungling, but still it is an idea. Men talk of it as though it were inevitable. The talk is low and the intensity with which it spoken varies. Some of the men talk viciously and blasphemously. Others quietly. Still others speak of it as though they were but bystanders or members watching a tragedy. But we all talk. We all pound our heels on the pavements and keep shuffling around feeling the fear perched like a crow in our hearts, pecking at our minds (13).

Kalar catalogues different discussions of "revolution" not only to show a lack of uniformity in its formulation, but also to satirize the social impact of revolutionary political rhetoric. Despite the different attempts at discussing revolution, the rhetoric fails to address the core problems that plague the American worker having to endure the Depression. Revolution is still an idea within the United States rather than a fully formed method of action. However, in place of the optimism that Kalar once used to herald "the idea" in "Skidway Seattle," there is a strong note of pessimism in describing the idea in

“Unemployed Anthology.” His change in the framing the revolutionary politics reflected the shift in the *New Masses* approach toward proletarian art and writing, and his own disillusionment with what he regarded as a distortion of the authentic forms of American worker culture. Ultimately, as *New Masses* adopted a stricter Communist line and Gold’s proletarian experiment was phased out of the magazine, Kalar’s documentary sketches came to reflect a less sectarian and political divisive approach to workers art and politics. Kalar’s sketches do not document a specific ideology so much as they attempt to mirror the diverse and often multiple viewpoints on how the working proletariat and its revolutionary politics should go about reforming the American social and political landscape.

Chapter 2

Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky's Documentary Histories of the United States in the

Eleven New Cantos and "A"-8

Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky are not often considered when thinking about the scope of American documentary poetics in the 1930s. This is especially true given the strong ties between documentary poetry and the worker-correspondent genre popular in the early part of the decade. As seen in the previous chapter, magazines such as *New Masses* encouraged poetic submissions from the “working proletariat,” and promoted writings that emphasized the detail and experience of labor. In this self-styled ecology of workers’ art, the strengths or weaknesses of the work were determined by fidelity to fact and authenticity. Mike Gold, as chief editor of *New Masses*, proclaimed that, “Facts are the new poetry. The proletarian writer will cut away from the stale plots, love stories, ecstasies and verbal heroisms of the fictionists of the past. He will work with facts. Facts are his strength. Facts are his passion.”¹ Moreover Gold called for a “national corps of writers” whose members would join and work in various industries in order to write from a position of expertise.² Social and class concerns drove the production of documentary poetry in left literary magazines, punctuated and shaped by the changing dynamics between the Comintern and CPUSA.

Pound and Zukofsky’s contact with the *New Masses* crowd of writers during the early to mid-thirties was brief but caustic. Mike Gold attacked Pound in the October

¹ Michael Gold, “Notes of the Month,” *New Masses* (Jan. 1930), 7. Hereafter abbreviated as *NM* in the text.

² See “A New Program for Writers” in *NM* (Jan 1930), in which Gold discusses the aims and projects of the newly formed John Reed Club in New York, and their involvement in different forms of workers’ art.

1930 issue for his support of Mussolini and criticism of the Soviet Revolution.³ And although generally sympathetic to Communism and the Soviet Union, Zukofsky was snubbed by regular *New Masses* contributors who declined to take part in his February 1931 “Objectivists” issue of *Poetry* magazine. Both poets were seen as reactionary modernist writers, privileging aesthetics over social import, and counter-revolutionary politics over revolution. Neither wrote poetry from a worker’s perspective, documented the daily conditions of factory life, or made any identification with the proletarian class. In essence, they were not worker-correspondents on the cultural frontlines, which was an integral part of the *New Masses*’ formulation of the documentary poet. Yet that does not detract from the documentary proclivities in the poetic work of Pound and Zukofsky during the 1930s. In particular, Pound’s *Eleven New Cantos* (1934) and Zukofsky’s “A”-8 (1935-37) make use of an array of documentary materials to show the destructive effects brought on by the collusion between financial and political powers within the United States. Both poets draw upon a wide range of sources to construct their economic histories, leveling a strong critique against finance capital and its disastrous impact on the American political and economic system. Thus the general social import of the *Eleven New Cantos* and “A”-8 places both poetic sequences into the overall political trend that documentary poetry encompassed during the 1930s.

It is worth noting, however, that Pound and Zukofsky’s poetic techniques and construction significantly differ from the worker-correspondent style of documentary poetry. In contrast to the ethos of lived experience and reportage that undergirds the workers’ genre, Pound and Zukofsky turn to pre-existing texts to etch out their political and economic documentaries. The materials included in the *Eleven New Cantos* and

³ See Gold’s “Notes of the Month,” *NM* (Oct 1930).

“A”-8 produce massive textual archives, formatting different intellectual histories that mark the development and upheavals of the United States. Together, both poets liberally quote from political thinkers such as Marx, Engels, and C.H. Douglas; American presidents such as Washington, Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and Van Buren; leaders and demagogues such as Lenin, Stalin, and Mussolini; and a variety of histories and memoirs. Pound and Zukofsky’s approach, therefore, is strikingly different from that of the industrial worker-poets who documented their first-hand experiences of the brutalities of American capitalism. Instead, both poets build poetic indexes that— as they argue — reveal the underlying political decisions and causes of the brutalities of American capitalism. The difference in documentary form and style boils down to the social immersion and embedding of the worker-poet versus the historiographic approach of Pound and Zukofsky.

Critics have discussed Pound and Zukofsky’s uses of other texts, as well as the formal and stylistic considerations that each poet brought to their work in the mid-1930s. Pound criticism in the early volumes of *Paideuma* largely took an apolitical stance toward his method of quotation, relegating the poet to the status of dispassionate editor.⁴ Likewise, earlier Zukofsky criticism focused on how the poet incorporated his sources for “A”-8 into various musical and poetic forms, forgoing discussion on the political framing

⁴ See in particular Robert M. Knight, “Thomas Jefferson in Canto XXXI.” Knight claims that Pound, in his role as an editor, “allows the prose of Jefferson, Adams, and their correspondents to speak for itself in Canto XXXI. Here the poet moves to the background and assumes the role of editor, cutting, pasting, and organizing what he sees as the heart of the correspondence. As with any good editor who has a stable of fine writers, he know enough to avoid tampering; to do otherwise would be to corrupt a finely developed style and, even worse, to misrepresent history” (79). In Knight’s reading, Pound acts as the arranger and objective historian of the texts that he uses, and avoids using Jefferson and Adams’ writings for his own political and economic ends. Knight clearly states that his “main concern here is to provide simply the source of the lines,” and the article is extremely useful for the reader of “Canto XXXI” in that it provides an in-depth catalogue of Pound’s sources. Also see William Chace, “The Canto as Cento: A Reading of Canto XXXIII” and Carroll Terrell, “Canto 34: The Technique of Montage.”

of the material that Zukofsky used.⁵ Later critics of Pound and Zukofsky moved away from apolitical readings, arguing that an understanding of both poets' economic and political views is fundamental to a critical analysis of their work.⁶ Scholars have looked closely at how Pound used the writings of early American presidents in the *Eleven New Cantos*, and how Pound's conception of revolutionary America influences his political and economic thought regarding Mussolini's Italy.⁷ Editions of Pound's correspondence to American senators and representatives and various other economic thinkers have been published in the last two decades, allowing the reader to see Pound's involvement in the political and economic debates of the 1930s.⁸ Although not as voluminous as Pound scholarship, criticism on Zukofsky in the last two decades has also stressed the importance of the poet's politics in understanding his poetic and prose work in the 1930s.⁹

⁵ See Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky's "A"*, 74-77.

⁶ Primarily, these scholars show how aspects of Pound and Zukofsky's poetic works from the 1930s have been influenced by theories on social credit and Marxism respectively, or illustrate certain themes central to each political ideology. Robert Casillo and Tim Redman have both emphasized Pound's relationship with fascism, and the resulting consequences it had on his poetic and prose work from the 1930s (see Casillo's *The Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism, and the Myths of Ezra Pound* and Redman's *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism*). Following Casillo and Redman, Alec Marsh has argued that there is a direct relationship between Pound's theories of economics and poetic language (see Marsh's *Money and Modernism: Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson*).

⁷ See Nick Selby, "Revolutionary Figures in Canto XXXI" and Stephen Wilson, "Pound's American Revolutions" in *Ezra Pound and America*, Ed. Jacqueline Kaye.

⁸ See *The Correspondence of Ezra Pound and Senator William Borah*, Ed. Sarah C. Holmes; "Dear Uncle George": *The Correspondence Between Ezra Pound and Congressman Tinkham of Massachusetts*, Ed. Philip J. Burns; and *Ezra Pound and Senator Bronson Cutting: A Political Correspondence*, Ed. E.P. Walkiewicz and Hugh Witemeyer. Also, see *Ezra Pound's Economic Correspondence, 1933-1940*, Ed. Roxana Preda, for additional correspondence that Pound had with C.H. Douglas, A.R. Orage, Gorham Munson, and others involved in the Social Credit movement.

⁹ Critics such as Mark Scroggins identify the Marxist and socialist leanings in Zukofsky's work from the 1930s, while carefully stating that he had no official ties to the party itself (see Scroggins' "The Revolutionary Word: Louis Zukofsky, *New Masses*, and Political Radicalism in the 1930s"). In a similar vein, Burton Hatlen sketches out the larger ties between Marxism and Objectivist poetry, and specifically focuses upon Zukofsky's Marxian treatment of his sources and language as a thing, although stating that

Yet while the criticism addresses Pound and Zukofsky's common critique of capitalism, it does not, however, discuss the extremely strained and argumentative relationship they had during the mid-30s and the affect that had on the production of the *Eleven New Cantos* and "A"-8. Although they had worked closely in the early thirties, their friendship began to sour by 1934. Pound's admiration for Mussolini's domestic policies, Social Credit economics, and his Jefferson and/or Mussolini vision of American history that fed into the *Eleven New Cantos*, put the left-leaning Marxist Zukofsky on the defensive. As their correspondence between the publication of *Eleven New Cantos* and "A"-8 bears out, the two poets viciously attacked one another's work and politics. Reading their documentary works through their correspondence, it is clear that Zukofsky's "A"-8 is, in part, a rejoinder to Pound's politics and his idiosyncratic history of the United States. Their poetic battle, so to speak, articulates some of the larger political flashpoints of the mid-1930s. The growing confrontation between fascism and the Soviet Union, the choices between different forms of economic collectivization and/or corporatism, and the onset of a new world war, frame the showdown in the *Eleven New Cantos* and "A"-8. But perhaps most importantly, Pound and Zukofsky's documentary sequences offer competing visions of American history and a slew of texts by which to understand the past, present, and future of that history. Similar to the worker-poets who self-consciously tried to incite and document the death-throes of capitalism, Pound and Zukofsky attempt to reformat the narrative of American history during a period of political, economic, and cultural instability within the nation.

only the first ten movements of "A" are politically motivated (see Hatlen's "A Poetics of Marginality" in *The Objectivist Nexus*).

Published in 1934, the *Eleven New Cantos* focuses primarily on the writings of the early American presidents, their social policies and economic views, and their attempts to reform the banking system of the United States. Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and Benito Mussolini are the heroes of the new cantos — Jefferson and Jackson for their populist economic policies, and Mussolini for being, in Pound's view, a modern day Jeffersonian. The shocking juxtaposition between the founders and Mussolini illustrates Pound's concept of intellectual history. In *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, written alongside the *Eleven New Cantos*, Pound writes: "The ideas of genius, or of 'men of intelligence' are organic and germinal, the 'seed' of the scriptures. You put one of these ideas somewhere, i.e. somewhere in a definite space and time, and something begins to happen" (*J/M* 21). In what could be called an *agricultural* schema of history, Pound argues that civilization always awaits its sowers: those men of genius whose ideas are allowed to run their course. Ideas can also remain dormant, pushing through cultural and historically bounded periods and act like seeds that can grow in any soil, even centuries later, given the right conditions. Thus, for Pound, the legacy of the Founding Fathers can be operational in Mussolini's Italy, revealing how Jeffersonian principles operate in the modern age.

Pound argued that Jefferson and Mussolini built their respective nations by effectively communicating their ideas through their writings and constructive actions.¹⁰

The politicians exemplified, for Pound, the highest integration of aesthetics, economics,

¹⁰ Pound had previously argued for the relationship between strong governance and the precise meaning and usage of words and their application in literature in *How to Read* (1931). He writes: "the governor and legislator cannot act effectively or frame his laws, without words, and the solidity and validity of these words is in the care of the damned and despised *literati*. When their work goes rotten – by that I do not mean when they express indecorous thoughts – but when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, *i.e.*, becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought and order goes to pot" (17-18).

and politics. Concerning Mussolini, Pound claimed that no “estimate of [him] will be valid unless it *starts* from his passion for construction. Treat him as *artifex* and all the details fall into place. Take him as anything save the artist and you will get muddled with contradictions” (*J/M* 33-34). Likewise, he theorized that Jefferson shaped and governed America through his correspondence and use of language: “[Jefferson] canalized American thought by means of his verbal manifestations” (*J/M* 15). Pound’s own efforts to juxtapose Jefferson and Mussolini in his new cantos were an endeavor in social construction in its own right. By placing the reader in contact with the “seeds” of history — for example, the documents of Jefferson or the ideas of Mussolini — Pound hoped to re-canalize modern political and social thought through his arrangement of texts within the *Eleven New Cantos*. The quoted texts are an attempt to show a legacy of populist economic policies stretching from the American Revolution to Mussolini’s fascist Italy. Many of Pound’s sources are marked, allowing the reader to track down the contexts for the excerpts.¹¹ In part, *Eleven New Cantos* acts as a poetic index for an economically driven transatlantic history. Relying on the perceived dynamism of the documents, Pound tries frame the ground for a new political worldview that can overcome the social problems of finance capitalism. The documentary project of Pound’s new cantos attempts to give detail to that worldview, showing the nexus between the American political experiment and Mussolini’s remaking of Italy.

Pound’s view of the history of ideas, or the ideas of history, is crucial to understanding his documentary poetics in the *Eleven New Cantos*. By using the writings and correspondence of the early presidents in his poetic sequence, Pound is not only

¹¹ Additionally, Carroll F. Terrell’s *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* is indispensable in tracking down and analyzing Pound’s use of his sources. The following discussion of Pound’s *Eleven New Cantos* draws from Carroll’s index and description of the various excerpts that comprise the new cantos.

narrating his version of American history, but also attempting to resurrect and nourish those ideas in the present day. Thus his recommendation to Republican senator William Borah to request a copy of the new cantos from his editor, writing that, “they summarize some of the country’s glory/ and IF intelligible should assist the reform of the party.”¹² Pound primarily identifies the *glory* of the United States in Cantos 31-33. In these opening cantos he portrays the dynamism and energy that resided in the formation and planning of the nascent United States. Primarily, Pound achieves this by organizing and poetically editing the correspondence of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and other key figures of the Revolution. Pound valued these men for their multifaceted approach to nation building and policy, especially their ability to think and act upon many different projects simultaneously. The poetic structure of Canto 31 bears out this multiplicity of thought, juxtaposing different concerns of varying magnitude in a stream of consciousness format. For example, Pound draws from Jefferson’s correspondence with Washington on the importance of the proposed western waterway that would link Lake Erie with the Ohio River:

I remember having written you while Congress sat at Annapolis
 on water communication between ours and the western country
 particularly the information....of the plain between
 Big Beaver and Cayohoga, which made me hope that a canal
navigation of Lake Erie and the Ohio (C 153).¹³

¹² Letter from Pound to William Borah, June 2, 1934. *The Correspondence of Ezra Pound and Senator William Borah*, 21.

¹³ The edition used for all references to Pound’s cantos is *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, New York: New Directions, 1996.

The canal was intended to be part of a system of national canals, linking major towns and industrial sites with one another. In the canto, Jefferson asks Washington for “better information” on the waterway and to “oblige me / by a communication of it. I consider the canal, / if practicable, as a very important work.” The episode, for Pound, shows that even in the country’s early history, its leaders had visionary ideas for infrastructure that would provide a sense of nation and allow for necessary westward expansion.

Immediately following the correspondence on the canal, Pound includes more of Jefferson’s writings on seemingly unrelated topics: “.....no slaves north of Maryland district.... /flower found in Connecticut that vegetates when suspended in air...” (C 153). Pound gives the overall impression of catching Jefferson in mid-thought, presenting a cross-section of his intellect. He crafts the montage effect to show Jefferson’s correspondence as a record of his leadership — a polymath exercising all of his faculties.

Pound’s arrangements of the founders’ correspondence in the opening sections of the *Eleven New Cantos* are intended to show their thoughts, and Pound’s own arguments, on what a successful democracy should entail. In Canto 32, Pound uses a letter from Jefferson to Governor James Jay on the proper methods of “civilizing” the Native Americans living in the colonies. Although Jefferson’s ideas involve strong overtones of subjugation, they still mark a sharp difference from earlier colonial methods of dealing with the native population. Jefferson writes:

[...] great improvement on the
ancient ineffectual...which began with religious ministrations.

The following has been successful. First, to raise cattle

whereby to acquire a sense of the value of property...
 arithmetic to compute that value, thirdly writing, to
 keep accounts, and here they begin to labour;
 enclose farms, and the women to weave and spin...
 fourth to read Aesop's Fables, which are their first delight
 along with Robinson Crusoe. Creeks, Cherokees, the latter
 now instituting a government (*C* 158).

Jefferson's advice to Jay is steeped in Enlightenment values and thought. Instead of dominating the Native American tribes through violence and proselytizing, Jefferson advocates a multiphase program to remake the Indians as liberal subjects within a new American civilization. For Jefferson, that civilization entails not only the comprehension of value, but also the means to properly assess and communicate that value.

Mathematics, writing, and the deft use of both are also necessary in order to keep records of wealth, livestock, and other materials. Jefferson envisions closed working spaces, farms and spinning wheels, to exploit the local resources and allow maximum concentration on work. Reading literature and obtaining a sense of western history is crucial for education and entertainment. Finally, self-governance and civil order appear as the final manifestation of Jefferson's program, attainable when the previous steps have been enacted. Jefferson recommends his program for the native populations, which indicates that these values are also a plan for expansion. Essentially, the letter formulates a basic idea for settlement and cultivation.

The inclusion of Jefferson's letter to Jay in Canto 32 is an example of what Pound calls a germinal idea: a dynamic text that has cultural and historical consequences. Its

step-by-step plan to establish the spread of civilization across the newly formed country offers a glimpse as to why Pound valued Jefferson. Additionally, the construction of value and ideas on economics within Jefferson's plan resonated with Pound. Throughout the 1930s, Pound was trying to develop an economic system that would be able to address what he saw as the shortcomings of finance capitalism. Pound's economics involved an eclectic mix of different ideas and programs: C.H. Douglas' theories on social credit, Gesells' stamp scrip, a Jeffersonian aversion to debt in order to finance the economy, reduced working hours in order to maximally distribute employment, amongst others.¹⁴ The primary problem that Pound wished to solve through economics was the inadequate distribution of goods. In his *ABC of Economics*, he writes: "Probably the only economic problem needing emergency solution in our time is the problem of distribution. There are enough goods, there is superabundant capacity to produce goods in superabundance. Why should anyone starve? [. . .] The 'science' or study of economics is intended to make sure no one does."¹⁵ According to Pound, in order to achieve optimal distribution, the consumer must have adequate purchasing power to buy the goods produced. Therefore, Pound's distribution problem is inherently a money problem. If the general population does not have an adequate supply of currency to buy the goods produced, then there will be widespread economic hardship. Additionally, if the value of

¹⁴ For more information on Pound's economics see Preda's *Ezra Pound's Economic Correspondence, 1933-1940*, especially her extensive introduction. Pound's views on distribution and purchasing power were heavily influenced by the social credit theories of C.H. Douglas, who, amongst other things, argued that the true purpose of production is consumption, that the prices and quantities of products should equal the purchasing power and demand of the consumer. See Douglas' *Economic Democracy* (1920) and *Social Credit* (1924, rev. 1933), both of which influenced Pound's economic thinking and poetics throughout the 1930s. Pound's introduction to Gesell's concept of "stamp scrip" was through Irving Fisher's *Stamp Scrip* (1933). Gesell's theory advocated a form of money that depreciated at a constant rate and required its holder to affix a stamp to it in order to maintain its original value (Preda 26-27).

¹⁵ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Economics*, 15. Henceforth abbreviated as *ABCE* in the text.

money rises and falls according to market forces, instead of productive capacity, then the consumer's ability to purchase goods will be imperiled beyond his or her control. Thus, according to Pound, there must be a direct correlation between production and the value of money: "When goods are produced, some recognition of that fact must be made, let us say in the certificates of goods in existence. Can we say that perfect money consists in true certificates of goods extant?" (*ABCE* 17).

Pound valued Jefferson's program for the native population not only for its plan to spread civilization, but also its conceptualization of value and wealth. In his letter to Governor Jay, Jefferson hinges the initial estimation and calculation of value to the raising of livestock. Money, therefore, is primarily an agricultural function, drawing from the cultivation and development of the land. Money is also a *positive* quantity: at root, it is a representation for a tangible, physical value. The importance of this point cannot be overstated in reference to Pound's theory of economics. According to Pound, the proliferation of currency must be tied to material production, rather than a system of credit and debt. A permanently debt driven economy was an anathema to Pound — a cancer that distorted value, allowed for political and financial despotism, and eventually skewed the nation's economic system towards a cycle of booms and busts. Thus, debt must not play a central role in a nation's economy if that country is to remain politically strong. To this end, Pound argued that Jefferson believed that "no nation has the right to contract debts not payable within the lifetime of the contractors," in effect preventing the accumulation of debt from generation to generation (*ABCE* 57).

Pound frames his poetic documentary history of the United States as a battle between Jeffersonian economics and the increasing power of bankers and capitalists who

manipulated the nation's economy through speculation and debt. In the *Eleven New Cantos*, he argues that the chief threat to the young, post-Revolutionary America was the hijacking of its economy. The danger of this threat, according to Pound, manifested itself in the growing political control of the financial sector and the simultaneous inertia of the nation's citizenry. As Pound writes:

Give a people an almost perfect government, and in two generations they will let it run to rot from sheer laziness (*vide* the U.S.A. where not one person in ten exercises his rights and not one person in ten thousand has the faintest ideas of the aims and ambitions of the country's great founders and lawmakers. Their dung has covered their heads.). It is nevertheless one's duty to try to think out sane economics, and to try to enforce it by that most violent of all means, the attempting to make people think (*ABCE* 38).

The second half of the *Eleven New Cantos* shows the rapid transition from an "almost perfect government" to its decline through destructive economic policies. Pound traces this progression from documentary evidence and histories, using first hand accounts of key economic battles throughout the 19th century. The purpose of the documentary history is twofold: to show how far the country has fallen since Jefferson and to restore information on the nation's economic history that Pound considered lost to the general populace.

One of these key forgotten moments, according to Pound, was the conflict between Presidents Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren and the Second Bank of the United States. Pound included the conflict in Canto 37, framing it as the beginning of the American decline into political and economic chaos. For Pound, the Bank marked an

erosion of governmental power to check the actions of bankers and industrialists. Its ability to print voluminous sums of money without regard to material backing and finance industry through the massive accumulation of debt stood as an economic atrocity for Pound. He argues in Canto 37 that by the 1830s the Bank rivaled the power of the government. Using sections of Martin Van Buren's *Autobiography*, Pound shows the immense economic size of the Bank in comparison to the reserves and revenue overseen by the federal government:

4 to 5 million balance in the national treasury

Receipts 31 to 32 million

Revenue 32 to 33 million

The Bank 341 million, and in deposits

6 millions of government money

(and a majority in the Senate)

Public Money in control of the President

from 15 to 20 thousand (id est, a fund for the secret service) (C 184).

Pound compresses Van Buren's words in describing the financial and political power that the Bank exercised. In addition to holding a significant part of the government's assets, the Bank had a balance that dwarfed the national treasury. Its investors spanned across many industries and nations. And ultimately as the passage and canto show, the Bank wielded influence in the Senate who voted to uphold its charter throughout the 1830s, defying Jackson's continual attempts to veto the Bank out of existence.

Pound focuses on the economically dangerous methods the Bank used to resist Andrew Jackson's attempts to veto its charter. By extending their credit and loans across

the country, the Bank created the fear of a financial crash if its charter were revoked. Pound emphasizes the increase in loans over the decade: “To which end, largely increased line of discounts / 1830, October, 40 million / May, 1837 seventy millions and then some” (C 183). These tactics of the Bank, and the fear of an impending recession, allowed it to gain political power, and “obtaining by panic / control over public mind” (C 184). Pound shows through Van Buren’s writings that the Bank’s collusion of economic and political power resulted from a deliberate skewing of the nation’s markets and industry. The Bank, according to Pound, was a direct assault on the principles of Jefferson and the founders who practiced sound economic strategy and responsible nation building. In *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, Pound identifies one of Jefferson’s “doctrines” as the fight “to keep the control of the nation’s finance out of control by a clique and to attain the use of the national resources for the benefit of the whole nation” (J/M 117). The policy of the Bank in Jackson’s time, according to Pound, was precisely the opposite: to transfer wealth and control of resources to private interests at the expense of government and the general population. Shortly following Jackson and Van Buren’s attempts to revoke the Bank’s charter, the Panic of 1837 set in as a consequence of land speculation and money inflation. Nevertheless, Pound ends Canto 37 with a poetic epitaph to Van Buren: “HIC JACET FISCO LIBERATOR,” or “here lies the liberator of money” (C 186). Pound saw Jackson and Van Buren’s efforts to reduce the size of the Bank, which eventually folded at the end of the 1830s, as an enduring legacy of Jeffersonian economics and politics.

Following the demise of the Bank of the United States, the *Eleven New Cantos* document a history that shows the acceleration of money inflation and economic

speculation as the nation slides into civil war. For Pound, the most lethal expression of a runaway economy driven by speculation and profiteering were exemplified by the actions of finance capitalism during wartime. Pound's politics and economics in the 1930s were galvanized by what he saw as the complicity between the international banking system and weapons manufacturers to perpetuate World War I by making loans and selling munitions to both sides. Likewise in Canto 40, Pound saw the American Civil War as an event that "wiped out" all knowledge of Jackson, Van Buren, and their war on the Bank of the United States: a war in which men such as J.P. Morgan used conflict to further their economic interests (*ABCE* 19). In Canto 40, Pound draws on Lewis Corey's *The House of Morgan* to show Morgan's manipulation of gold prices during wartime:

Dollars 160 thousand, one swat, to Mr Morgan

for forcing up gold.

"Taking advantage of emergency" (that is war)

After Gettysburg, down 5 points in one day—

Bulls on gold and bears on the Union

"Business prospered due to war's failures" (*C* 197-98).¹⁶

The concise passage demonstrates the use of war to drive up profits. Pound shows how Morgan drove up the price of gold when an emergency situation, "that is war," required an influx of capital for the Union army to buy more weapons, food, and stabilize supply lines. As soon as the North decisively won a battle, such as Gettysburg, and the need for

¹⁶ Pound's use of Lewis Corey's (Louis C. Fraina) work is interesting and jars with his own political and economic viewpoints insofar as Corey was a foundational member in the American Communist Party in 1919. For more on Corey's life and work see Buhle's, *A Dreamer's Paradise Lost: Louis C. Fraina and Lewis Corey and the Decline of Radicalism in the United States*.

capital momentarily decreased, gold was sold-off and allowed to fall five points in a single day. Morgan hinged the future of the Union upon his own economic benefit, without regard to the implications of extending the war. For Pound, Morgan's manipulation of currency during the Civil War exemplified the danger and immorality of an economic system that is actively disengaged from and working counter to the government.

The economic history of the United States that Pound documents is one of decline and erosion, in which power and capital is increasingly transferred for private control and use. The engine of that decline, as Pound argues throughout *Eleven New Cantos*, was a money policy that allowed its value and volume to be determined by market forces and business interests. The Bank of the United States used debt and money inflation to threaten Jackson and Van Buren with an economic panic if their charter were revoked. Likewise, Morgan's ability to speculate and drive the prices of gold allowed him to intervene in the strategy of the Civil War. Pound's hatred of the Bank and Morgan's financial speculation stemmed from his own economic views that he had been fine-tuning since the early 1930s. Essentially, Pound saw the concept of value, and its manifestations as money or credit, as rooted in the productive capacities of nature. In his *ABC of Economics*, published a year before the *Eleven New Cantos*, Pound rejects the determination of value through market forces, which he considered hallucinatory, arguing that "The fundamental difference in wealth is that of animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms . . . Economic habits arise from the nature of things"(ACBE 56-58). The difference between animal, vegetable, and mineral affected value due to the different properties of each category, including its given rate of decomposition, its productive

capacities, and its use value.¹⁷ Market value, economic speculation, and other processes of the capitalist system thus ran *contra natura* for Pound, phantasmically operating irrespective of reality.

Pound ends *Eleven New Cantos* with Mussolini as a gesture towards a reemerging Jeffersonianism. Canto 41 opens with Pound's meeting with Mussolini and his discussion of *A Draft of XXX Cantos*. Pound emphasizes the social works projects and acts of construction under Mussolini, drawing an implicit comparison to Jefferson and Washington's actions in Canto 31:

Having drained off the muck by Vada
From the marshes, by Circeo, where no one else wd. have
drained it.
Waited 2000 years, ate grain from the marshes;
Water supply for ten million, another one million "vani"
that is rooms for people to live in.

XI of our era (C 202).

Similar to Jefferson's ability to think and act on different projects simultaneously, Pound presents Mussolini's draining of the marshes as a complex act with various outcomes. According to Pound, Mussolini's actions increased the amount of arable land, production of grain, the supply of water, and places to live. The draining of the marshes provided the resources needed for the expansion and modernization of Italy. Pound presents this episode as a modern corollary to Jefferson and Washington's plans for national

¹⁷ Pound also saw the basis of ethics as emanating from the natural world via economics. In the *ABC of Economics* he extends his discussion, writing: "The practices of rent and interest arise out of the natural disposition of grain and animals to multiply. The sense of right and justice which has sustained the main practice of rent and interest through the ages, *despite* countless instances of particular injustice in the application, is inherent in the nature of animal and vegetable" (57).

infrastructure. He considers Mussolini's acts of nation building as constitutive of a new era — “XI of our era.” The new fascist era, as seen by Pound, is an extension of the old Jeffersonian era that he constructs in *Eleven New Cantos* — a return to able men of action at the helm of government and a responsible economic policy.

Following the publication of *Eleven New Cantos*, the economic correspondence between Pound and Zukofsky escalated in quantity and tone. Although both poets had been at odds with each other over the relative merits of Social Credit theory and Marxism, their correspondence after Pound's new cantos reflected a new level of anger and frustration. At times, Pound's anger towards Zukofsky's commitment to Marxism manifested itself as anti-Semitism, showing his growing slide from an economic to a culturally based fascism. In one such letter, Pound admonishes Zukofsky for his recalcitrance towards social credit: “Seriously, yew hebes better wake up to econ . . . If you don't want to be confused with yr/ ancestral race and pogromd . . . it wd/ be well to modernize / cease the interuterine mode of life/ come forth by day etc.”¹⁸ Pound had used a similar phrase in Canto 35 — “intravaginal warmth of / hebrew affections” — to partly pin the chaos and fragmentation in Europe following World War I on the perceived inability of Jews to integrate themselves in modern society. Pound's cultural critique of Zukofsky follows well-worn Jewish stereotypes and prejudices of the time, drawing on fears of the so-called alien and insular qualities of Jewish communities. However, his criticism of Zukofsky is also economically based, suggesting that Marxism promotes “interuterine” or fragmented modes of economic and cultural ways of living. For Pound, the power of social credit theory and money reform lay in its promise to re-unify and

¹⁸ *Pound/Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky*, Ed. Barry Ahearn. May 6-7, 1934. 158. Henceforth abbreviated as *P/Z* in the text.

debated with Zukofsky over the difference between an economics focusing on the commodity versus one focused on labor:

You bloody buggaring fool/

Have you not even sense enough to USE A WORD with meaning and let the meaning adhere to the word.

A commodity is a material thing or substance/ it has a certain durability.

[...]

Labour may transmute material, it may put value into it, or make it serviceable. I suppose it comes of being a damn foreigner and not having bothered to learn english.

[...]

In Italian it is clear, lavoro non e merce

The workman can't store it/ it is not a product, that he can put on shelf for a month. It is not something he can dig up and keep (*P/Z* 168).

For Pound, although labor was necessary in the extraction of raw materials to make goods for consumption, labor itself did not have an intrinsic value similar to a commodity. Pound's letter to Zukofsky attempts to refute the labor theory of value: the concept that a commodity's value is directly related to the quantity of labor that produced it. Labor may place value into material, but it cannot be stored, kept, or calculated like a product, according to Pound. In the *ABC of Economics*, Pound argues that the distribution of labor and a shorter workday will help alleviate economic and labor problems. He is seemingly self-aware of his contrarian position: "You can't arouse any very fiery passion on the bare plea of less work. It spells less pay to most hearers. By

simple extensions of credit (paper credit) it would probably be possible to leave the nominal pay exactly where it is, but it requires an almost transcendent comprehension of credit to understand this” (*ABCE* 36). Pound’s understanding of credit as a function of national productivity allowed him to theorize labor as essentially flexible. What mattered in terms of industry was the capacity to produce, not the quantity of hours worked by an individual laborer. Thus, in Pound’s economic schema, labor is not coterminous with the commodity.

Zukofsky, however, shot back at Pound, defending Marxist economics and the labor theory of value. Quoting Pound’s letter, Zukofsky makes the case for considering labor in the calculation of a commodity’s value:

“A commodity is a material thing or substance / it has a certain durability” — E.P. May 28/35. I.e. taking you at your word, the moon, Mars, an extinct crater, man’s shit — not fertilizer because labor has been put into it, and it has social value. Unmined coal is a material thing, but not a commodity. When the miner digs it up, it has a use value because so much labor power has been expended digging it up for a social need. [...] [R]ead Charlie [Karl Marx] and find out for yourself why labor is the basic commodity (if that word is to have any consequential meaning at all) and how the products of labor are just the manifestations, and money yr. capitalistic juggling, of that commodity (*P/Z* 171).

The crucial difference between Pound and Zukofsky’s economic thought lies in the consideration of the commodity and the role of labor in determining its value. Following Jefferson’s agrarian leanings, Pound argued that “[e]conomic habits arise from the nature of things (animal, mineral, vegetable) (*ABCE* 58). Labor may put value into the

commodity insofar as the laborer works with nature and its productive capacities. Thus the prominence of Jefferson, Jackson, and Van Buren in *Eleven New Cantos* — men who fought against capitalism that created value and credit from debt. Zukofsky, on the other hand, asserts that labor is the basic commodity and plays a primary role in calculating the value of a commodity. In other words, value is a function of social relations rather than determined by the nature of things. Zukofsky, like Pound, equally dislikes the notion of financing the economy through debt, but sees the solution to the problem through the primacy of labor.

Zukofsky responded to Pound's money and credit-centric *Eleven New Cantos* with his own labor-centric "A"-8. Similar to Pound's documentary style, Zukofsky composed his poem from pre-existing texts to establish an intellectual history that emphasized the primacy of labor. The concept of labor played an important role in Zukofsky's poetics during the 1930s. Zukofsky saw the poet as a laborer and the writing of poems as the creation of material objects. In his essay "Sincerity and Objectification," written for February 1931 edition of *Poetry* that he edited, Zukofsky outlined his idea of a materialist poetics.¹⁹ He argued that "distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, tho it may not be harbored as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such" (*P+* 194). In a footnote to "Sincerity and Objectification," Zukofsky writes, "It is assumed that epistemological problems do not affect existence, that a personal structure of relations might be a definite

¹⁹ The term "sincerity" refers to "writing which is the detail, not the mirage of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist" (*P+* 194). Sincerity deals with the minutiae of the poem and its subject matter. "Objectification," on the other hand, deals with the relationship between the reader's perception of the poem and its existence as a complete object: "the totality not always found in sincerity and necessary only for perfect rest, complete appreciation" (*P+* 194).

object, or *vice versa*” (*P+* 196).²⁰ Similar to Pound, Zukofsky theorized that intellectual work and its practitioners play a dynamic role in the unfolding of material history. Ideas act and have the same force as objects, according to both poets, and both used the writings of politicians, economists, and historians in their poetry to articulate their worldviews.

Pound and Zukofsky’s fundamental difference, however, lay in their ideology towards the texts they use. For Pound, the political and cultural landscape of any given nation depends on a few great men. In terms of the United States, he argued that Jefferson “canalized American thought by means of his verbal manifestations” (*J/M* 15). Similarly, he regarded Mussolini as the “artifex” of modern Italy and compared him to an editor who separates good copy from “bunkum” (*J/M* 74). Ultimately, Pound viewed history as a succession of literary monuments and political giants. Zukofsky, however, took a more pluralistic view towards building his intellectual history. His poetic theory reflects his approach towards history, especially in terms of how he described the relationship between the poem, the poet, and the larger context or world in which both operate:

A poem. A poem as object—And yet certainly it arose in the veins and capillaries, if only in the intelligence—Experienced—parenthesis—(every word can’t be overdefined) experienced as an object—Perfect rest—Or nature as creator, existing perfect, experience perfecting activity of existence, making it—
theologically, perhaps—like the Ineffable—

²⁰ As Mark Scroggins rightly points out in *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge*, the ambiguity concerning the existence of the poetic object — of whether it acts as an actual material object, or is simply registered by the reader as such — shows Zukofsky’s penchant with doing away with epistemology and the problem of knowledge (45-46).

A poem. Also the materials which are outside (?) the veins and capillaries—The context—The context necessarily dealing with a world outside of it—The desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars (*P+* 207).²¹

Zukofsky posits an extreme fluidity between the poem, the poet, and his materials. A wide range of factors may influence the act of poetic invention and the poem's status as an object: from the poet's physiology and anatomy, to natural forces, or the historical and social context for the work. Any given object, including the poetic object, is a complex nexus of different materials, forces, and influences. Above all, the poem as an object is subject to the forces of history, both in terms of antiquity and modernity.

Zukofsky composed "A"-8 as a literal nexus of historic and contemporary particulars, bringing together a wide array of texts from different time-periods and disciplines. Labor ultimately serves as the "direction" for the particulars of "A"-8 and he shows the concept as it relates to a slew of topics, including politics, economics, science, and the history of the United States. Given the exchange on economics with Pound, Zukofsky's central focus on labor throughout the documentary sequence appears as a clear response to Pound's economic vision in the *Eleven New Cantos*. Whereas Pound constructs a history through documents that show the primacy of understanding and implementing good models of credit and an economics based on nature, Zukofsky documents a history driven by labor-oriented economics, science, and philosophy. His selections and arrangement of his texts establish a multi-disciplinary approach to labor. The style of presentation allows for his texts on labor to blend in with one another,

²¹ Zukofsky, "'Recencies' in Poetry," delivered, according to LZ's note, at the Gotham Book Mart, New York, August 1931.

creating a sustained discussion that spans different disciplines. The purpose is not only to show labor as the driving force of human history and social relations, but also to argue that the concept can be instrumental in theorizing the humanities and aesthetics as well. The labor-centric worldview in “A”-8 brings together political and economic texts and events while also theorizing cultural and aesthetic artifacts as essential parts of the labor process.

Through his spliced texts, Zukofsky argues that adopting a multi-disciplinary view of labor firmly entangles intellectual thought and physical work, making them inextricable from one another. Zukofsky juxtaposes selections from different texts to construct a shared view of labor. For example, he includes an extended section that focuses on Marx that opens the larger discussion on labor in “A”-8:

Friends too tired to see differences,

This, Marx dissociated:

“Equal right . . . presupposes inequality,

Different people are not equal one to another”

But to make the exploitation by one man of many impossible!

When the opposition between brain and manual work will have disappeared,

When labor will have ceased to be a mere means of supporting life,

Whether it was ‘impossible for matter to think?’

Duns Scotus posed,

Unbodily substance is an absurdity

like unbodily body. It is impossible

to separate thought and matter that thinks (45-46).²²

Zukofsky builds his compressed poetic text from multiple works, in the process crossing different historical moments, documenting the philosophical debate over the concept of socialism, and presenting a genealogy of the texts of communism in miniature. He accomplishes this by not quoting Marx directly, but by drawing from Vladimir Lenin's extended use of Marx in *The State and Revolution* (1918).²³ In particular, Zukofsky uses "The First Phase of Communist Society," a section in Lenin's *The State and Revolution* in which the role of labor is discussed in relationship to the theorized stages of communism. In the section, Lenin quotes Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875) to elaborate and support his argument. Marx's *Critique*, in turn, is an intensive critical assessment of the political and economic doctrines of Ferdinand Lassalle and the German democratic socialist movement, an organization with whom Marx was in close contact. Thus, in a few lines Zukofsky outlines a textual heritage in which ideas are challenged, transmitted, and constitute an intellectual record.

The dispute between Marx and Lassalle begins Zukofsky's overall discussion. Marx criticized Lassalle's concept of socialism, outlined at the 1875 party congress at Gotha, for its theorization of how a communist society would emerge and proclamations regarding social and financial equality. According to Marx, the current relations of production in industrial Germany could not immediately grant socialism and equal rights to men, since the concept of rights "can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby," and thus would mainly serve

²² The edition used for all references to Zukofsky's "A"-8 is "A," Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993.

²³ The following discussion of Zukofsky's sources for "A"-8 is indebted to the invaluable collaborative *Z-site: A Companion to the Works of Louis Zukofsky* at <http://www.z-site.net>, founded and maintained by Jeff Twitchel-Waas.

to legitimize the inequalities between men (*Gotha*). Zukofsky quotes Lenin quoting Marx to demonstrate the distillation of this point: “*Equal right . . . presupposes inequality / Different people are not equal to one another.*” Instead, Marx saw the development of communist society as a series of stages emerging from capitalism: “What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has *developed* on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it *emerges* from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges” (*Gotha*). Lenin accepted Marx’s stages of progression over Lassalle’s de facto implementation of a communist society, and Zukofsky emphasizes that choice through his textual embedding.

Following this, Zukofsky selects Lenin’s quotation of the final stage in Marx’s schema of communist society, in which equal rights according to one’s ability and needs are now possible: “When the opposition between brain and manual work will have disappeared, / When labor will have ceased to be a mere means of supporting life.” For Zukofsky, as for Marx and Lenin, the total vision of labor in which there is no distinction between mental and physical labor is indicative of the final stage of history. Instead of the exploitation of labor by capital, the full productive capacities of human labor are achieved. Marx heralds the integration of mental and physical labor as the sign for the complete development of the individual. Furthermore, as Zukofsky shows, Marx places his thoughts on labor in relation to prior writing on materialism. To demonstrate, Zukofsky splices his excerpts of Lenin on Marx vs. Lassalle with Marx on the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus: “Whether it was ‘impossible for matter to think?’ / Duns Scotus posed, / Unbodily substance is an absurdity / like unbodily body. / It is impossible

/ to separate thought and matter that thinks.” Zukofsky draws on Engels’ *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* for Marx’s meditation on Scotus, thus replicating a similar circulation of texts as in *The State and Revolution*. The content of Scotus’ question is not as important as the fact that Marx uses the scholastic philosopher to articulate his own thoughts on an entangled vision of labor in which the human intellect can be manifested materially. Through his poetic interconnections and splicing of texts, Zukofsky sets out to create a historical index for the concept of labor.

However his poetic index and intellectual history of labor not only draws on philosophers and political figures such as Duns Scotus, Marx, Engels, and Lenin, but also incorporates thoughts on labor from the social sciences as well. Zukofsky uses the work of Thorstein Veblen as part of his multi-disciplinary approach towards labor. In his essay, “The Evolution of the Scientific Point of View,” Veblen argues that knowledge and the scientific process are essentially products of social and cultural development. Zukofsky compresses Veblen’s text in order to express its connection with the other excerpts of “A”-8:

Process: notion about which the researches cluster.

The knowledge sought and the manner of seeking it

Are a product of cultural growth.

[...]

The inquiry converges upon a matter of process,

And it comes to rest,

Provisionally, when it has disposed of the process (56).

Veblen's theory of the relationship between knowledge and cultural growth resembles Zukofsky's casting of the poem as the direction of historic and contemporary particulars. In order for the poem to gain social and aesthetic efficacy, poetic activity must realize its place in the present while being able to measure the political, economic, and cultural forces that are exerted from past events. Zukofsky argues that a proper understanding of labor in its social and productive relations is precisely the engine that drives the direction of history. His arrangement of texts that focuses upon different aspects of labor, whether political, philosophical, or sociological, is an attempt to document that unfolding of history.

Zukofsky's formulation of labor provides the grounding for his American history in "A"-8. Rejecting Pound's central historical narrative of the United States as the tension between Jeffersonian economic policies versus the inflationary policies of the Bank, Zukofsky instead shows the primacy and protection of labor, whether in the form of physical or mental work, within American history. To make this point clear, he opens his American history with a single sentence from a graduation address given by Stalin to the Red Army Academy: "People: the most valuable of capital" (70). Zukofsky's use of Stalin strikes a clear difference from Pound, not only ideologically but economically as well. For Pound, *nature* was the most valuable of capital — the source and structure of all economic activity. Deliberate inflation and debt financing was thus a violation of nature, since both bypassed the natural order of things in the creation of wealth. But by arguing that *people* are the most valuable of capital, Zukofsky poetically asserts the Marxian position that labor is the fundamental commodity and that the bedrock of the nation ultimately lies in social and productive relations between laborers of all kinds. For

example, Zukofsky illustrates the early Revolutionary state with two key events spliced together:

“Workingmen in Boston and New York —
 The Committee of Mechanics —
 Refused to carry on work of erecting fortifications
 To close ports to rebels,

“Don’t Tread on Me!”

Tom Jefferson defender of the Shaysites (71).

The first example describes the efforts of colonial labor organizations, the Committee of Mechanics, to prevent the British from cutting off rebel American supply lines. The second example refers to the Shaysite rebellion, in which farmer-veterans of the Revolutionary war, whom Jefferson later defended, took up arms to prevent their farms from going into foreclosure. Both events show laborers and working-class people organizing for the purposes of defending individual liberty and confronting an overbearing government. The contrast between the opening of Zukofsky’s American history and Cantos 31-33 is striking. Whereas Pound focuses on the supreme guidance of the founders, Zukofsky shows the fledgling nation in light of workers organizations and their interactions with the early American presidents.

Zukofsky also gives prominence to intellectual labor, countering Pound’s age of Jackson and Van Buren as fiscal warriors with a positive depiction of John Quincy Adams’ scientific pursuits. Although Pound had included Quincy Adams in his new cantos, he dismissed him harshly in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, especially for his

interests in astronomy: “Washington could see mathematics from the ground end, geometry in its initial sense, measuring of the earth. Quincy Adams took it as astronomy, furthest possible remove from all human contact or human ‘pollution,’ as I suppose all human quality may appear to a man suffering from puritanitis” (*J/M* 89). Zukofsky explicitly argues against Pound’s comparison of Washington as a man of action and John Quincy Adams as an abstract idealist by showing a direct line between the two presidents’ achievements in “A”-8. To do this, Zukofsky draws from “The Heritage of Henry Adams,” written by Brooks Adams, the grandson of JQA. Brooks Adams essay served as a historical retrospective, both for his brother Henry Adams and the political career of John Quincy Adams.²⁴ In the essay, Brooks Adams writes of the connection between Washington and JQA, particularly in light of the canal system. Brooks Adams writes:

[I]n 1799 Washington died, leaving his scheme of converging highways embryonic, and his federal capital, which should have been the focus of American exchanges, industry, and thought, little better than a wilderness. And he failed because he could not bring it about that his canal should, at that precise moment of time, be built by government funds or, in other words, collectively . . . And it was then that John Quincy Adams took up the theory of constructive centralization, not indeed precisely at the point at which Washington had left it, but with the expansion due to the operation upon the problem of the scientific mind.²⁵

²⁴ The work of Henry and Brooks Adams greatly influenced Zukofsky’s concept of American history. For more, see Zukofsky’s “Henry Adams: A Criticism in Autobiography,” in *Prepositions+* (86-130).

Or sorrow in reflecting how little we can ever know

of it . . . of

Almost desponding hope that we may know more

of it . . . (71-72)

Just as Washington and Jefferson attempted to centralize and strengthen the nascent United States through their plans for infrastructure, Zukofsky regards Quincy Adams' pursuit of astronomy and observatories as a first step in centralizing and giving infrastructure to the American "scientific mind." His scientific pursuits are thus presented in "A"-8 as significant contributions to intellectual labor and the development of American history.

After countering Pound's American history in "A"-8 through the writings and histories of the early American presidents, Zukofsky specifically addresses Pound's politics and commitment to Mussolini's Italy. Similar to his American history, Zukofsky accomplishes his critique of fascist politics through the quoting and incorporation of other texts. In particular, Zukofsky uses Jefferson's *Autobiography* to argue against Mussolini's corporatism:

It is not by the consolidation

Or concentration of powers (corporate bodies)

But by their distribution,

That good government is effected (90).

Zukofsky adds the parenthetical note concerning corporatism to his excerpt, allowing Jefferson's words to reflect both upon the early American government and Italian fascism. His use and addition to Jefferson's *Autobiography* is not simply an attack on

Pound's admiration for Mussolini's political and economic policies, but also a sharp critique of his selective use of Jefferson's writings and, by extension, Pound's documentary poetic history in *Eleven New Cantos*. Pound's argument in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* and his new cantos attempts to establish a strong link between the American president and the fascist dictator through their perceived drives to consolidate governmental power and to wrest economic activity from private control. However, through his use of Jefferson's *Autobiography*, Zukofsky argues that the president's position on consolidation was precisely opposite to what Pound presented in *Eleven New Cantos*. Rather than consolidation of political power and canalizing American life, Zukofsky depicts Jefferson as a proponent of the distribution and decentralization of governmental power.

Although Zukofsky's enthusiasm for the Soviet Union would eventually end at the close of the 1930s, and the ensuing war change both poets' political viewpoints, the showdown between their documentary works of the mid-30s marks a volatile period of political upheaval and possibility. Pound and Zukofsky's archival approach to their subjects broadened the scope of documentary poetry, arguing for the circulation of texts as a significant dimension to the genre. By incorporating a wide range of memoirs, letters, and works of political philosophy, social science, and economics, both poets not only document their versions of American history, but also flesh out the intellectual histories that provide the architecture for their respective visions of the United States. Ultimately, the *Eleven New Cantos* and "A"-8 form a bibliographic map of the United States and its global intersections poised on the precipice of war, but confident that sound economics would allow a step backward.

Chapter 3

From Verse to Screen: Muriel Rukeyser's Documentary Film Adaptations of "The Book of the Dead" and the Rise and Fall of the Popular Front

In a radio interview in early 1938, Muriel Rukeyser described how techniques associated with film influenced the composition of her recently published "The Book of the Dead." She explained that, "it would be misleading to describe my poem as narrative poetry in the ordinary sense. I have tried to write a series of poems which are linked together as the sequences of a movie are linked together . . . so that during the sequence the reader has built up for him the story and the picture."¹ Rukeyser's filmic concept of her poem places "The Book of the Dead" alongside other documentary films and photo-texts produced in the late 1930s – a relationship that has been explored extensively.² In addition to Rukeyser's involvement with the Film and Photo League and Frontier Films, scholars have noted that the formal aspects central to 30s documentary film and photo-text aesthetics, including montage and use of testimonial witness, are dominant modes within "The Book of the Dead." Rukeyser edited her materials, drawn from trial transcripts, congressional records, and the subcommittee hearings, to reveal the severe corporate negligence that led to the deaths of hundreds of tunnel workers at Gauley

¹ "Radio interview of Muriel Rukeyser by Samuel Sillen," quoted from Dayton, 147. Dayton states that although the interview is undated, it was most likely conducted early 1938.

² In particular, Kalaidjian and Davidson both make strong arguments for reading "The Book of the Dead" alongside a wide range of documentary arts and social projects. Kalaidjian states that Rukeyser's poem "as a critical documentary spliced together the generic conventions of photomontage, reportage, participant observer, and informant narrative modes that, supported and promoted by the Federal Art Project and other WPA programs, made up the definitive textual styles of the 1930s" (166). Davidson also identifies the formal elements of Rukeyser's documentary project as connected to the larger documentary trends of the 1930s, writing that the poem "offers a striking synthesis of narrative poetry and documentary culture as it emerged through various federal agencies (Works Project Administration, Federal Arts Project, Farm Security Administration) and through collaborative projects such as those of Agee and Evans. It is against this backdrop of the era's photojournalism and investigative reporting that "The Book of the Dead" must be read" (140).

Bridge, WV. Critics have noted Rukeyser's deft use of juxtaposition in handling her sources, a technique that allowed her to register the vast scale of Union Carbide & Carbon's criminal conduct through the rapid accumulation of textual evidence. In "The Book of the Dead," Rukeyser places the testimony of the Gauley Bridge workers, in which they describe their suffering, alongside the evasive testimony of company doctors, orders for quick burials to hide the extent of the disaster, and a stock quote for Union Carbide showing the company's profits despite the ensuing human devastation. The montage of events and excerpts illustrates the gulf between capitalism and the average worker during the Depression, a theme that fueled the production of left documentary arts during the 1930s.

Yet despite this rich body of scholarship, the relationship that critics claim between Rukeyser's documentary poem and the American documentary film and photo-texts of the 1930s overlooks her serious attempt to adapt "The Book of the Dead" for film.³ Rukeyser worked on a film about the Gauley Bridge disaster between 1938-1940, shortly after the publication of her poem. Though she never completed a full script, she published sketches for a film version titled "Gauley Bridge" in the quarterly *Films in* 1940. She also sent her published sketches to Paramount Pictures, and a second, unpublished sketch to Columbia.⁴ Rukeyser still drew her materials from the sources she

³ Tim Dayton is alone in mentioning Rukeyser's film sketches for "The Book of the Dead," but does not engage in a thorough analysis of the film's projected content, nor remark upon the similarities and differences between the documentary poem and film. However, similar to Kalaidjian and Davidson, Dayton stresses the connection between "The Book of the Dead" and 1930s documentary arts, writing that her film sketches "demonstrate that she shared the interest in documentary common on the Left in the 1930s" (64).

⁴ A copy of the *Films* piece, which she sent to Paramount Pictures, can be found in Box 1:42 of the Muriel Rukeyser Papers at the Manuscript Division in the Library Congress. The second unpublished version sent to Columbia Pictures, titled "Story Outline for Gauley Bridge," slightly differs from the *Films* publication

used in “The Book of the Dead,” but she changed her approach to the project. An editorial note in the sketch sent to Columbia Pictures reads: “although this is an acted story-picture, all the tool [sic] of the documentary film should be used – blueprints, X-rays, bits of radio news, actual conversation, excerpts from the Congressional hearings, to reinforce the action. A new technique, combining both kinds of film, may well be worked out in Gauley Bridge” (“C,” 5). Rukeyser envisioned her documentary film as a hybrid of two different styles: the montage film, in which voiceovers provide the context and cadence for the cut and spliced documentary footage, and the dramatized documentary, which relied upon actors, scripts, and backdrops to recreate real events.⁵ Rukeyser planned to include documentary materials from “The Book of the Dead” in “Gauley Bridge,” by streaming them through the acted story, integrating them into conversations, voiceovers, and scenes throughout the film.

As Rukeyser’s sketches demonstrate, her conception of her documentary film was far different from that of her documentary poem, both in terms of its formal aspects and political valences. In “The Book of the Dead,” Rukeyser employs the tactic of montage not only to reveal the tragedy of Gauley Bridge, but also to articulate her Popular Front internationalism, formed through her experiences of covering the start of the Spanish civil war.⁶ Identifying a common struggle shared by workers and leftward political

and can also be found in the same box. Both manuscripts were rejected and returned to Rukeyser in 1940. Within the text, I will refer to the *Films* version as “GB” and the second version, sent to Columbia, as “C.”

⁵ For more on the progression from montage to enacted documentary film, see Barsam’s discussion of Pare Lorentz’s *The Fight for Life* (1940), which used actors and sets (157-159), and Campbell’s analysis of Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand’s *Native Land* (1942), which employed a hybrid montage and dramatic documentary format (237-73).

⁶ Rukeyser went to Spain in June 1936 to cover the Anti-Fascist Games in Barcelona, held in protest to the upcoming Olympics in Berlin. Increasing hostility between the Republican government and the conservative Nationalists erupted into civil war five days before the Games started. Although Rukeyser

groups across different nations, Rukeyser situated the Gauley Bridge tragedy alongside the Spanish civil war in her documentary poem. The juxtaposed scenes do not follow the story of any one individual or family in Gauley Bridge. There are no characters in the poem, only images and testimony that, reflected against one another, create an overall pattern of suffering and neglect that moves from the local toward the global. In “Gauley Bridge,” however, Rukeyser creates a strong dramatic narrative by focusing on the actions and lives of specific characters. Through her depiction of the characters’ interactions and their local relief efforts, Rukeyser substitutes a more nationally oriented view of the industrial tragedy in her film for the Popular Front internationalism that had once animated “The Book of Dead.” The Popular Front had already started to unravel as Rukeyser began her film project, first with Republican losses in mid-1938 and cumulating with the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact of August 1939. Thus, rather than situating the Gauley Bridge workers within a worldwide spectrum of struggle, Rukeyser’s re-appraisal of the tragedy in her film instead shows how their experiences typify the hardship and privation of the American migrant worker, an issue which had reached a peak in national attention by 1940.⁷ Rukeyser’s choice of narrative for the documentary film enabled her to show the lives and fortitude of the Gauley Bridge workers as they

was quickly evacuated from the war zone, she was able to stay long enough to witness the beginning of the fighting, which she covered in “Barcelona, 1936” and “Death in Spain: Barcelona on the Barricades” for *Life and Letters To-Day* and *New Masses* respectively. Within the text I will refer to the former as “B36” and the latter as “BB.”

⁷ Along with photojournalistic works that documented the lives of depression era farmers and migrant workers, such as Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Now Seen Their Faces* (1937) and Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange’s *American Exodus* (1939), John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and John Ford’s feature film of Steinbeck’s novel in the same year brought the plight of American migrant workers to the forefront of national attention. Additionally, the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens” was appointed in April 1940 to assess the reasons behind the increasing migrant population. At the first committee hearings in New York, several participants noted that Steinbeck’s novel was partly responsible for establishing national attention on the issue of migrancy (Part 1, 319, 358).

tried to deal with the devastation left by Union Carbide. Their experience, according to Rukeyser, illustrates a powerful episode in the narrative of American migrancy and the determination to provide a voice for those workers who cannot speak. Ultimately, the changes Rukeyser made in re-imagining “The Book of the Dead” – her poem that drew on the techniques of documentary film – as an *actual film* not only demonstrate important shifts in both Rukeyser’s documentary aesthetics and political vision, but also mark a significant transition between the 1930s and 40s in American documentary film.

Rukeyser’s interest in the events of Gauley Bridge stemmed from her activities as an independent journalist and activist. In 1933 she traveled to Decatur, Alabama to cover the Scottsboro trials as they entered a second round. She and her party were arrested by the local police and eventually chased out of town under threats of violence (“Scottsboro” 12). She stayed involved with the trials, however, working for the International Labor Defense who managed some of the appeals and retrials for the Scottsboro defendants (Thurston 65). By 1935, word of the Gauley Bridge disaster began to circulate, at first in radical venues such as *New Masses*.⁸ But as *Time*, *The Nation*, and *The New York Times* began to take notice, especially in the wake of the House subcommittee hearings in early 1936, the deaths at Gauley Bridge quickly became national news.⁹ In much the same spirit as Scottsboro, Rukeyser traveled to the construction site in March 1936 with photographer Nancy Naumburg to investigate the events that led to the deaths of hundreds of tunnel workers. The workers had been employees of Union Carbide,

⁸ See Albert Maltz, “Man on a Road” and Bernard Allen, “Two Thousand Dying on a Job.” Bernard Allen was a pseudonym for Philippa Allen, a New York City social worker, who later testified at the House subcommittee hearings in January 1936.

⁹ See Cherniak 81-88, for a thorough, chronological breakdown of the magazines, newspapers, and media networks covering Gauley Bridge throughout 1936.

working to divert the New River for a hydroelectric dam project from 1929-1931 (Cherniak 19). Initially intended as a West Virginian public utility, the construction job soon turned into a mining operation when Union Carbide discovered rock containing 99% silica, valuable in industrial applications such as the electro-processing of steel. Union Carbide decided to sell the power to a local subsidiary – the Electro-Metallurgical Company, located a few miles from the construction site in Alloy – rather than selling to the local area (Subcommittee 3). In order to extract the silica quickly the workers were forced to use dry-drilling techniques without masks or proper ventilation in the tunnel. As a result, hundreds of workers died from silicosis. Many were buried in unmarked graves to hide the extent of the industrial disaster, and ill-defined laws governing compensation for silicosis allowed company lawyers to block many cases from coming to trial (Subcommittee 124, 78).

As part of her research into the tragedy, Rukeyser collected documents that became the basis for “The Book of the Dead.” Indiana representative Glenn Griswold, the chairman for the subcommittee investigating Gauley Bridge, sent Rukeyser a copy of the subcommittee hearings as well as a copy of the *Congressional Record*, in which he gave information from the hearings.¹⁰ Griswold also wrote to Rukeyser, explaining the bureaucracy responsible for the stalled state of the investigations and asking for her help:

The hearings have been discontinued due to the fact that the Committee on Labor has no authority to subpoena witnesses nor money with which to conduct a further investigation. There is now pending before the Rules Committee . . . House Resolution number 429 which asks this power be granted the committee and an

¹⁰ Rukeyser identifies the Griswold’s remarks as one of her sources for “The Book of the Dead” at the end of the 1938 edition of *U.S. 1* (146).

appropriation be made to further conduct the investigation. The Rules Committee is holding this resolution up without giving us a hearing on the same. If we could be granted hearings on this resolution and the Rules Committee treated it favorably and it was adopted by the House then the work in connection with the investigation could be carried on. If there is anything you can do in the way of publicity to bring this matter to the attention of the country I am sure all members of the committee and those interested in the spread of information concerning occupational diseases would be appreciative of your efforts.”¹¹

Whether Rukeyser had already decided to write “The Book of the Dead” before receiving Griswold’s letter is unclear. However, it is not difficult to speculate on the impact that Griswold’s exhortation must have had on the production of her poem. The letter provides government support and encouragement for “The Book of the Dead” as a project that could increase national attention on Gauley Bridge. The consequences of such a project were, according to Griswold, multiple. He implied that Rukeyser’s work could be the catalyst for breaking the bureaucratic deadlock in the House; focusing on the deaths of the tunnel workers would spread information on occupational diseases – an increasing problem in the American materials industry. Perhaps most importantly the continuing House investigation, backed by subpoena power, would be able to question Union Carbide executives and engineers in order to get a more complete picture of what happened at Gauley Bridge.

The events of the summer of 1936, however, diverted Rukeyser from a single-minded focus on Gauley Bridge and influenced the materials for “The Book of the Dead”

¹¹ Letter from Glenn Griswold to Muriel Rukeyser, April 9, 1936. Box 1:43, Muriel Rukeyser Papers.

in unexpected ways. On June 10, 1936, Rukeyser sailed from New York to Barcelona to cover the Anti-Fascist Games for *Life and Letters To-Day*.¹² Rukeyser's train was the last one to enter the country before the start of the war, leaving her stranded in Moncada twelve miles outside of Barcelona ("B36" 26). The games were eventually cancelled due to the fighting, and many of the athletes remained in Spain to join the international brigades that were allied with the Republican forces. As a result Rukeyser's reporting shifted to the armed conflict between the Spanish loyalists and the nationalist and fascist forces. In "Barcelona, 1936" and "Barcelona on the Barricades," for *Life and Letters To-Day* and *New Masses*, respectively, Rukeyser presents Moncada as an impromptu hub for an array of armed groups, labor unions, athletes, and stranded travelers. At times the political consensus between the different groups is strained. For example, Rukeyser writes of an encounter between Hungarian athletes and Spanish anarchists:

A Hungarian makes the clenched fist, saluting [the anarchists], but they glare and make a clawing sign. "But who are you? Aren't you communists?" "Communists? No. We're anarchists." "Well, what does it mean? What do you want?" ("B36" 27).

Overall, however, Rukeyser's portrait of Moncada is one of unity among the different leftist groups. Having driven through the war zone with a group of athletes to reach the Hotel Olympic in Barcelona, Rukeyser describes the scene as "international and sympathetic; here the teams are arriving steadily, all with stories of a successful Popular Front in Catalonia" ("B36" 31). Additionally, she writes for *New Masses* that, "As the army passed, team after team sang the 'Internationale': Norwegian, Dutch, English,

¹² See Rukeyser's daily diary of her trip to Barcelona. Box 1:1-3, Muriel Rukeyser Papers.

Belgian, German, Italian, Hungarian, American” (“BB” 19). For Rukeyser, the first days of the war showed the promise of the Popular Front and the international challenge to totalitarian and reactionary governments that had been gaining ground in Europe throughout the twenties and thirties.¹³ Spain stood at the vanguard of a new anti-fascist alliance on the offensive, and in her articles she argues for its importance, paraphrasing the organizer of the games: “You came to see games, and have remained to witness the triumph of our People’s Front. Now your task is clear; you will go back to your countries and spread through the world the news of what you have seen in Spain” (“BB,” 11).¹⁴

Rukeyser’s enthusiasm for the internationalism in Spain shaped her Popular Front approach to the events at Gauley Bridge in “The Book of the Dead.” For Rukeyser who had witnessed the carnage and loss of life in Spain firsthand, the Republican and international fighters were similar to those American workers afflicted by industrial disease. In their struggles and deaths both groups revealed the deterioration and sickness in the larger political and social orders in which they lived. In “The Disease: After Effects,” Rukeyser blends personal accounts of representatives and excerpts from the

¹³ At the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in 1935 the Soviet Union promoted the Popular Front, a new anti-fascist doctrine which stressed “that unity of action be established between all sections of the working class, irrespective of what organization they belong to . . . by seeking to reach agreements with the organizations of the toilers of various political trends for joint action on a factory, local, district, national and international scale” (Resolution 103). Prior to the Seventh World Congress, under the policy of the Third Period, socialists, liberal democrats, and leftists of “various political trends” other than Communism were considered to be “social fascists” by the Comintern, due to their perceived alliances with the bourgeoisie and capitalism.

¹⁴ In addition to framing Gauley Bridge through Spain and the Popular Front, Rukeyser also memorialized Barcelona and Republican Spain in her poem “Mediterranean,” published in *U.S.I.* “Mediterranean” had a publication history prior to *U.S. I.*, appearing as a multi-page feature in *New Masses*. Additionally, Rukeyser’s civil war poem was used in a pamphlet titled “Mediterranean,” published by the Writers and Artists Committee for the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy in 1938. The pamphlet contains testimonials from artists about the work of the Committee, describes the efforts of American writers and artists in raising money for doctors, medical supplies, and hospitals in Spain, and includes a mail-in form for donations.

Congressional Record to show the legislative process in the House as it relates to both the Gauley Bridge episode and the growing threat of international fascism. The section opens with Montana representative Jerry J. O’Connell, who in 1937 had both introduced a bill to prevent the spread of industrial silicosis, and a resolution to push FDR to invoke the Neutrality Embargo against Germany and Italy for supplying Franco with military aid.¹⁵ O’Connell’s concern for political and social rights of workers on both sides of the Atlantic provided Rukeyser with a perfect symbol of the Popular Front. Rukeyser also shows that O’Connell’s political motivations stem from his childhood experience with labor unrest and silicosis. His memories show how a legacy of repressive violence against politicized labor sustains the exploitation that creates and ignores industrial disease:

I was five, going on six,
 my father on strike at the Anaconda mine;
 they broke the Socialist mayor we had in Butte,
 the sheriff (friendly), found their judge. Strike-broke.
 Shot father. He died: wounds and his disease.
 My father had silicosis (59-60).¹⁶

The death of O’Connell’s father from gunshot wounds and silicosis displays the relationship between labor violence and occupational illness. Rukeyser emphasizes this connection in other sections in “The Book of the Dead,” revealing that physical

¹⁵ For a description of O’Connell’s bill to prevent industrial silicosis, H.R. 7971, see *Congressional Record*, 75th Congress, 1st session, Vol. 81, pt. 7, July 22, 1937, 7462. For O’Connell’s resolution requesting FDR to invoke the Neutrality Act, H.J. Res. 390, see *Congressional Record*, 75th Congress, 1st session, Vol. 81, pt. 2, 5236.

¹⁶ For more on the early history of Butte’s mining unions and labor conflicts from the late 19th century through World War 1, see Mercier 9-45.

aggression against the workers increased the spread of silicosis. In “George Robinson: Blues,” for instance, Rukeyser uses testimony from the subcommittee hearings to show how the company foremen rushed the miners back into the tunnels shortly after detonations, significantly increasing the quantities of silica dust that the workers inhaled: “When the blast went off the boss would call out, Come, let’s go back, / when that heavy loaded blast went white, Come, let’s go back, / telling us hurry, hurry, into the falling rocks and muck” (34). The intimidation and threats of violence at Gauley Bridge created a working environment in which silicosis was an inevitable result. Likewise, as in the case of the Anaconda strike, employers often resorted to violent strike breaking in order to avoid improving the horrendous working conditions that produced diseases such as silicosis.¹⁷

Rukeyser uses the violence associated with silicosis to frame the disease in terms of warfare. Taking Glenn Griswold’s congressional remarks on the subcommittee hearings and splicing them with O’Connell’s memories, she transforms the statistical data on the threat of silicosis in American industry into an account of military casualties, bringing the disease and the Spanish civil war into the same theater of operations:

There are today one million potential victims.

500,000 Americans have silicosis now.

These are proportions of a war.

¹⁷ In the subcommittee hearings, both Dr. R.R. Sayers, in charge of industrial hygiene in the U.S. Public Health Service, and William Yant, of the U.S. Bureau of Mines, speak of silicosis in Butte, Montana. Sayers gives more detailed information about the miners around the time of the Anaconda strike: “Dr. A.J. Lanza found . . . in 1916 that 432 of 1,018 examined in Butte, Mont., were so affected [with silicosis]” (151).

Pictures rise, foreign parades, the living faces
 Asturian miners with my father's face,
 wounded and fighting, the men at Gauley Bridge
 my father's face enlarged (60).

Rukeyser creates a montage of images, drawing on three distinct conflicts: the Anaconda mine strike, in which O'Connell's father had taken part, the Gauley Bridge disaster, and the miners' insurrection in Asturias, Spain. The conflict in Asturias erupted in October 1934 after political deadlock between the socialist and conservative parties blocked economic relief in the worsening depression — especially in the coal- and iron-producing region of Asturias. Local militias made up of miners and union laborers attacked governmental posts in an attempt to stage a coup against the conservative government. The insurrection was put down several weeks later by Franco and set the stage for the opening of the civil war that Rukeyser witnessed in 1936.¹⁸

Remembering the death of O'Connell's father by gunshot wounds, Rukeyser grafts his face onto that of the Asturian miners and draws an explicit association between labor conflicts across time and place. For Rukeyser, the violent defeat of the Asturian miners' insurrection mirrors the attack on the strikers in Butte. Both groups of miners held a variety of anarchist and socialist views, and managed to align themselves through union activities. O'Connell's father's death by silicosis, however, also grafts his face upon "the men at Gauley Bridge." As a victim of the disease, he shares the fate of the exploited and oppressed workers at Gauley Bridge who, by extension, share the fate of the striking Anaconda and Asturian miners. All three groups of workers share the same

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of the Asturian revolt see Bunk 13-34.

disease. Rukeyser's layering of images, her montage, equates the oppressions of Franco's fascism with the abuses of America's corporate capitalism.

In turn, these workers and their experience with silicosis serve as examples for other American industries in which occupational illness is rampant. Rukeyser draws from Griswold's remarks to provide information on the disease within industries and manufacturing processes that involve large quantities of silicates:

Copper contains it, we find it in limestone,
 sand quarries, sandstone, potteries, foundries,
 granite, abrasives, blasting; many kinds of grinding,
 plate, mining, and glass.

Widespread in trade, widespread in space!

Butte, Montana; Joplin, Missouri; the New York tunnels,
 the Catskill Aqueduct. In over thirty States.

A disease worse than consumption (60).

Rukeyser's montage method of placing different cities and industries alongside one another reveals the extent of the silicosis problem and shows how she conceptualizes the root cause of occupational disease. Silicosis, for Rukeyser, is a disease born out of the American system of industrial capitalism, a disease linked not only to the basic materials of manufacturing, but also to the common practices of extraction and commerce, being "widespread in trade." The silicosis bill that O'Connell introduced to the House approached occupational illnesses of all kinds as lethal by-products of an unregulated market. He proposed that the U.S. government "regulate interstate commerce in goods

produced under conditions exposing employees to the hazards of silicosis and related dust diseases” (7462). Rukeyser presents silicosis in “The Book of the Dead” as a disease having both a social and economic dimension. The need to consume coupled with the desire to increase profits while driving down costs result in human devastation similar to that of the war that Franco was waging against his own people in Spain.

Rukeyser also implicates the American political system in the spread of the disease. Drawing from the records of the subcommittee hearings, Rukeyser associates the progression of silicosis with the dysfunction and corruption of the Congress:

It sets up a gradual scar formation;
 this increases, blocking all drainage from the lung,
 eventually scars, blocking the blood supply,
 and then they block the air passageways.
 Shortness of breath,
 pain around the chest,
 he notices lack of vigor.

Bill blocked; investigation blocked (61).¹⁹

For Rukeyser, Congress’ inability to pass O’Connell’s bill despite the damning testimony from the subcommittee hearings and the data showing the extent to which occupational disease affected American industry, demonstrates that the disease also affects the country’s political system. The blocking of the bill not only reflects on the immediate issue of silicosis, but also reflects a breakdown in the nation’s social and political

¹⁹ See Dr. Emory Hayhurst’s trial testimony in the subcommittee hearings (85-86).

structures in their ability to respond to and solve the root problems of industrial illnesses. The gradual inability to undertake and pass legislation and lack of political “vigor” mirrors the physical deterioration of the silicotic worker. By comparing the physiological conditions of silicosis with the failure of the House, Rukeyser constructs an image of occupational disease whose symptoms manifest throughout the American political and economic system of the late 1930s, in addition to the lungs of its workers.

Rukeyser ultimately places Union Carbide’s malfeasance in a global context, building the case that the deaths of the Gauley Bridge workers, and the rise of occupational disease within the United States, are part of a complex state of war stretching from the battlefields of Spain to the working conditions within material and manufacturing industries. Indeed, in the final section of the poem, she calls upon her readers to see the victims of the industrial disaster as part of a larger international front of maligned and oppressed people:

all these men cry their doom across the world,
meeting avoidable death, fight against madness,
find every war.

Are known as strikers, soldiers, pioneers,
fight on all new frontiers, are set in solid
lines of defense.

Defense is sight; widen the lens and see
standing over the land myths of identity,

new signals, processes” (71).

Rukeyser not only places the miners of Gauley Bridge within a worldwide spectrum of strikers, soldiers, and those fighting for political and social rights, but also argues that the possibility of such a perspective depends upon the precise handling of documentary materials. “Widen the lens,” Rukeyser writes, and the “myths of identity” which separate different groups of workers through accidents of culture and geography collapse, revealing a shared front of political struggle. For Rukeyser, the call to widen the lens directly informs her use of documentary sources to tease out a larger pattern that can explain the tragedy of Gauley Bridge. Her montage method allows her to bring together disparate texts and events in order to build a strong relationship between the conflict in Spain and the silicosis epidemic in the United States. Fascism and silicosis, according to Rukeyser, shared as their root causes the unwillingness and inability to solve basic economic and social problems, resulting in systemic political failure in both the United States and Europe.

A key example of Rukeyser’s strategy of “widening the lens,” of bringing the Gauley Bridge tragedy into relation with the spread of global fascism, lies in her use of the documentary evidence of the X-rays of the tunnel workers. In an effort to show the common roots of the Gauley Bridge disaster and the rise of fascism, Rukeyser portrays the spread of totalitarianism as a virulent form of disease, as deadly as the silicosis that claimed the lives of the Gauley Bridge workers. X-ray technology, used extensively during the subcommittee hearings and court cases, gave Rukeyser an unprecedented view inside the silicotic worker and provided concrete evidence that confirmed the unnecessary health hazards of working in the tunnel. It also conveyed the severity of the

disease to specialists and non-specialists alike. The X-rays showed the characteristic conglomeration of scar tissue and nodules across the lungs that eventually led to the asphyxiation of the victim. Throughout “The Book of the Dead,” Rukeyser incorporates descriptions of the X-rays that the medical specialists gave at the trials. In “The Disease,” for example, Rukeyser includes a courtroom examination of an X-ray depicting stage two silicosis:

More numerous nodules, thicker, see, in the upper lobes,
 You will notice the increase: here, streaked fibrous tissue
 [. . .]
 That indicates the progress in ten months’ time.
 And now, this year – short breathing, solid scars
 even over the ribs, thick on both sides.
 Blood vessels shut. Model conglomeration” (31-32).²⁰

The description of the patient’s condition charts the relentless progress of silicosis across the lungs and ribs. Rukeyser’s terse editing of Dr. Hayhurst’s testimony renders the diagnosis of the disease impossible to deny, and counters the misleading diagnoses of silicosis as pneumonia, asthma, or “tunnelitis” that were falsely given to the workers (Subcommittee 32-33, 39). The X-ray provides her with powerful scientific and medical evidence of the affects of the silicosis and sets Gauley Bridge at the center of converging disciplines and discourses that mark the modern approach to occupational disease.²¹

²⁰ For more of Dr. Hayhurst’s explanation of Johnson’s X-ray, the stages of silicosis, and general trial testimony, see “Examination of Dr. Hayhurst from Johnson Case” (Subcommittee 89-101).

²¹ For a detailed discussion of X-ray technology and its effect on how the disease was diagnosed, see Kadlec 26-30 and Wolosky 157-163.

Rukeyser, however, is not content to address the X-rays as evidence of only one tragedy. She also uses the X-ray image to connect Gauley Bridge to the total theater of war that she had seen since 1936. Through a conceptual widening of the X-ray lens, Rukeyser transforms the mottled and damning views of the miners' lungs into a topographical surface shared between Gauley Bridge, Spain, and other unnamed conflicts counted amongst the Popular Front war:

No plane can ever lift us high enough
 to see forgetful countries underneath,
 but always now the map and X-ray seem
 resemblent pictures of one living breath
 one country marked by error
 and one air (60-61).

Just as the X-ray marks the progression of silicosis in the worker's lungs, the map records the spread of war and the fascist alliances that strengthened across the continents in the late 1930s. Both the X-ray and the map register the growth of disease that eats away at human flesh and the social fabric of nations, marking Gauley Bridge and Spain as "one country marked by error / and one air." Through the sound play between the *resemblent* "error" and "air," Rukeyser stresses the links between the political and social errors that led to fascism and the brutal style of American industrial capitalism and the resulting toxic environment that people are cast into as a result. The X-ray in "The Book of the Dead" turns into a geopolitical metaphor, extending its medical purpose to make visible the connections and diseases which affect the world body politic. According to Rukeyser, the diagnoses of diseases worldwide, whether medical or political, silicotic or

fascist, creates the urgent need for Popular Front solidarity. Her juxtaposition of silicosis and fascism as different degrees of the same disease raises Gauley Bridge from a local story to an event of international importance and charts a new front for the growing war.

At its outset, the film version marked a distinct change in Rukeyser's conceptualization of the Gauley Bridge disaster, revealing the different ways in which the documentary materials might be arranged. Rukeyser's initial explorations into adapting "The Book of the Dead" for film took place soon after its publication. In a letter to Glenn Griswold, Rukeyser hoped that "a full-length feature film with commercial distribution [could] be made on the story of silicosis – the Gauley Bridge story in its widest meanings." Furthermore she asked, "to have an advisory committee of the investigation committee to authorize such a film," which would have essentially made Rukeyser's film ancillary material to the subcommittee hearings.²² Rukeyser also wrote to Sam and Bella Spewack, who gained fame writing plays and screenplays throughout the 1930s and 40s, to discuss potential actors for various parts and to enlist their support in writing the screenplay.²³ Rukeyser informed the Spewacks that the British documentary filmmaker Paul Rotha had expressed interest in making the film, Rex Ingram would be available to play George Robinson, and that she was in conversation with Morris Carnovsky and members of the Group Theatre to fill out the rest of the cast. Arrangements for the music had also been made, and blues artist Leadbelly would be involved. Rukeyser had already counted on Griswold and the subcommittee's support in making the film:

²² Letter from Rukeyser to Glenn Griswold, January 2, 1938. Box 1:43, Muriel Rukeyser Papers.

²³ The Spewacks achieved their greatest success with their book *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), for which they won Tony Awards for Best Musical and Best Author of a Musical.

I believe that Washington authority and possible backing on this can be had . . . I shall drop the whole idea if the picture is not possible as a full-length feature, with commercial distribution, or if it shows any signs of falling into an ordinary documentary short on a shoestring basis. But so many individuals are eager to go ahead now, and the appeal of the situation is so wide, and its dramatic content so potent, that I want very much to push it through . . . It would be the first of a hoped-for series of picture [sic] that a unit set up for this could go on with, and I should value your work on the plan – the picture – very highly.”²⁴

Rukeyser’s appeal to the Spewacks and her description of the documentary film project demonstrates the strong impulse she felt to publicize the Gauley Bridge tragedy.

Rukeyser’s optimism about the possible commercial distribution of the film followed the success of Pare Lorentz’s *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937), the latter film enjoying national distribution and international success (Barsam 156-57). Her hope that a “unit” could be established to produce documentary films in the same vein as her projected work on Gauley Bridge stemmed from the New Deal’s interest in film, and anticipated the formation of the United States Film Service by eight months.²⁵

Yet the form of Rukeyser’s documentary film departed from the structure of Lorentz’s breakout films and her own earlier documentary poem. In the letters written to

²⁴ Letter from Rukeyser to Sam and Bella Spewack, January 2, 1938. Box 1:43, Muriel Rukeyser Papers.

²⁵ The Resettlement Administration funded the shooting and research for *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and most of *The River*, which was completed under its successor agency, the Farm Security Administration. The success of both documentary films led to the formation of the United States Film Service, with Lorentz as its first director (Barsam 157). With USFS support and oversight, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration employed Robert Flaherty to direct *The Land* and the Rural Electrification Administration contacted Joris Ivens to direct *The Power And The Land* (Mercey 9). However, facing increasing resistance from Congressional Republicans in their refusal to appropriate the necessary funds to the Film Service, the USFS was dissolved June 30, 1940 (Mercey 10-11).

Griswold and the Spewacks, Rukeyser emphasizes the dramatic potency of the events at Gauley Bridge and moves strongly towards narrative as a vehicle for organizing her material. Rukeyser's plan to make "Gauley Bridge" a dramatized documentary, replete with actors and scripts, marked a shift away from the montage style that had dominated 1930s American documentary film. Films such as *The River* or Leo Hurwitz's *Heart of Spain* (1937) were comprised of cut-and-spliced footage organized around a centralizing voice track. In describing the composition of the vocal track for *Heart of Spain*, director and Frontier Films member Leo Hurwitz stated: "I was always aiming toward the most sensitive, clear, vivid use of language that did not stand by itself, but that stood in relation to a complex and chemical interaction with the development of the image" (Campbell 184-85). Photo-textual works such as Caldwell and Bourke-White's *You Have Now Seen Their Faces* (1937) and Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free* (1938) also shared Hurwitz's approach towards text and image, attempting to extend the meaning of both through their interaction. Although "The Book of the Dead" did not contain photographs, Rukeyser developed crucial images in her documentary poem through her precise and vivid use of language, transforming X-rays into maps marking international conflict, or using medical descriptions of silicosis to illustrate the deadlock and dysfunction in Congress. Her specific use of montage allowed her to create connections between conflicts separated by geographic space, and show the cultural and occupational diversity within the Popular Front.

Rukeyser's move towards enacted documentary for "Gauley Bridge" was part of the general shift at the end of the 1930s towards dramatization and acted scenes in documentary film. The shift is evident in the later films of Hurwitz and Lorentz, both of

whom employed a montage style in their early work. Both Hurwitz and Lorentz used actors, scripted dialogue, and dramatized scenes in *Native Land* (filmed 1937-39, released 1942) and *The Fight for Life* (1940) respectively. Hurwitz's *Native Land* offered a mix between spliced footage and enacted scenes, while Lorentz's *The Fight for Life* was fully scripted for actors. Hurwitz explained his new documentary method for *Native Land*, which drew much of its material from the LaFollete Senate Committee, stating: "The many volumes of committee testimony contained essential data on the class struggle of the thirties in its wide social aspect as well as in the individual stories of its participants. To weave together the large social design with the human details required thinking in terms of a new film form. This combined the enactment and the document, the lyrical and the statistical, the overall social pattern and real story episodes" (Campbell 259). Hurwitz's argument for the necessity of a new film form marks an important intellectual shift in American documentary film as montage gives way to narrative modes in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Hurwitz argues that montage inevitably overlooks the "human details" required to obtain a complete account of social and political struggle. Narrative, according to Hurwitz, allows the documentary filmmaker to more accurately show the intersection and interaction between social and political structures and the individual lives that are affected by them. Montage can capture larger social and political relationships, but, as Hurwitz states, ultimately fails in its ability to fully flesh out human experiences caught within, and defined by, those relationships.

Rukeyser's move toward dramatic narrative in "Gauley Bridge" shared Hurwitz's theory and method by emphasizing the lives of the Gauley Bridge workers within the larger social context of the industrial tragedy. Although "The Book of the Dead" had

included personal details of various workers and their families, Rukeyser's Popular Front montage framing of her documentary poem effectively generalized the experience of the Gauley Bridge workers. The poem situated the Gauley Bridge tragedy as only one manifestation of class inequality. The Gauley victims were, by extension, no different than other exploited workers around the globe. In the film sketches for "Gauley Bridge," however, Rukeyser focuses primarily upon the townspeople and their local committee as they work to bring justice and reparations to the victims of the disaster. Rukeyser still draws from the same source records she used for "The Book of the Dead," such as the subcommittee hearings and the *Congressional Record*, but she presents the material by integrating it into the dramatic action of the film. Scenes from the trials used the X-ray prints. Parts of Mearl Blankenship's letter were heard as a voiceover, while he struggles to eat dinner with his wife. Text from the hearings and the *Congressional Record* was integrated into the dialogue between characters. The overall effect was a dramatized documentary, emphasizing the individual and communal hardship of the Gauley Bridge workers while relying on the hard data that formed the basis for her documentary poem.

Ultimately, the differences that Rukeyser imagined between her poem and her film were profound. As the sketches for "Gauley Bridge" reveal, Rukeyser pulled back from her global vision to focus on the individuals and families who lived and worked within Gauley Bridge. She rewrote the disaster as a narrative with characters, giving expanded roles to Arthur Peyton, Mearl Blankenship, and Juanita Tinsley. In the sketches, Rukeyser presents Peyton as a tireless advocate for the Gauley Bridge workers, risking his livelihood and reputation to reveal the abysmal working conditions within the tunnels. In a particularly dramatic scene, he confronts the company after fainting in the

tunnel due to the high concentration of toxic fumes: “Peyton goes into the tunnel. He is overcome by monoxide from the locomotive. Coming to, he shrieks against the company and this wholesale murder in front of all the men who are standing around. He is taken to the doctor, and, in the course of the examination, he finds out that he has silicosis; he is given two years to live” (“C” 9). After his experience in the tunnel, Peyton quits his job, sues Union Carbide, and writes a letter describing the conditions of the construction site to Congressman Anthony, a character modeled on Rep. Jerry J. O’Connell.²⁶ A company informant working in the post office, however, intercepts his letter, and as a result “[h]e is blackballed in the town, because he sued the company” and “the company doctor and the other engineers who have worked in the office cut him in the street” (“C” 10).²⁷

However, Peyton’s experiences with silicosis and being blacklisted foster his resilient attitude toward the hostile elements of the town, expressed in the film through his relationship with Francis Jones.²⁸ In “The Book of the Dead,” Rukeyser leaves Peyton’s “love” unnamed. The relationship is doomed by Peyton’s terminal diagnosis of silicosis, and he urges his lover to “never repeat you mean to marry me” (45). Peyton’s episode within the poem is brief and the impression is one of overwhelming pessimism and hopelessness. Rukeyser includes the story of Arthur Peyton as an instance of the growing pattern of misery in Gauley Bridge, which she ultimately frames as part of a

²⁶ See Rukeyser’s letter to the Spewacks, in which she mentions the Congressman as a character, “modeled on Jerry O’Connell.”

²⁷ The interference with the mail in Gauley Bridge is briefly mentioned in “The Book of the Dead” in the section “Praise of the Committee”: “Rumored, that in the post-office / parcels are intercepted. / Suspected : Conley, Sheriff, hotelman, / head of the town ring — / Company whispers. Spies, / The Racket” (22).

²⁸ Francis Jones does not appear in “The Book of the Dead.” In the film she is the daughter of Celia Jones, whose testimony at the subcommittee hearings and narration are central to “Absalom” in “The Book of the Dead.” At the hearings, Celia Jones states that there are eight people in her family, but does not mention a daughter named Francis (Subcommittee 37).

larger, global workers' front. In the film she rewrites this episode, giving hope to the fledgling relationship: "Frances and Peyton, with Peyton seeing his own position, seeing how he has been forced, against his will, step by step, to speak for many others, to take all the risks open to a man. He loves Frances. They will be married. They will have a child; and the spirit will live. And Peyton may live, he says gaily, although we know he cannot, except through his wife and child" ("C" 12). Whereas in "The Book of the Dead," Peyton proclaimed to his love that he would live on in a "stream of glass a stream of living fire," stressing his complete lack of autonomy within the juggernaut of Union Carbide's material industry, in the film he voices his optimism for his future, his legacy, and the importance of his actions against the company. Peyton emerges from the pattern of misery in the poem to spearhead reform and change in the film. His social agency in "Gauley Bridge" marks a shift in Rukeyser's political attitudes toward the industrial tragedy by highlighting a concerted effort on the part of local residents to push for justice and relief, both for themselves and those who were unable to do so.

In a similar vein, Rukeyser expands the role of Mearl Blankenship, who appears in both "The Book of the Dead" and "Gauley Bridge." In the documentary poem, Rukeyser portrays Blankenship primarily through a letter that he wrote describing the working conditions in the tunnels, his declining health, and the continuing refusal of the company lawyers to provide him with his settlement. The letter not only serves as Blankenship's testimonial of his life after the hydroelectric dam, but also emphasizes the pathetic and powerless situation in which he has been cast. Rukeyser gives no indication that the letter was ever received either by the city or the paper that Blankenship had in mind. Moreover, he barely speaks within the poem except through the letter. The

excerpts of the letter in “The Book of the Dead” essentially act as an epitaph for the terminally ill Blankenship, showing the reader the inhumanity and grief of his situation. In the projected film, however, Rukeyser greatly expands the sequence, depicting Blankenship and his wife eating dinner while the letter is read as a voiceover. Rukeyser opens the scene with a detailed account of their home:

The interior of a two-room shack, wood walls covered by newspapers, cracks sealed with clay, the newsprint repeating ads across the walls, the light from two kerosene lamps on the wooden table and one more on a shelf near the door lighting the living room with a flat, glaring whiteness. At the table, Blankenship, gaunt and with smoky hollows in his face, sits back in his chair, his long arms braced against the table-edge. His wife is a faded girl, protective towards him, very capable, with no fire left.

The two are seen close, from the opposite corner of the table, after a wide view of the whole room and the door leading to the bare bedroom. The lamps, the pictures on the wall (The Coliseum, View of Harper’s Ferry), a commercial calendar with an Indian girl on it, an old sideboard obviously handed down, a rocker, a small table with dog-eared law book on it, are all the furnishings of the room (“GB” 55-56).

The opening of the scene provides a striking contrast to the poem, which does not give any sense of place or class to the Blankenship family. The description of the household with wood walls covered in newspaper, kerosene lamps, and the Blankenships seated at opposite sides of the table, is reminiscent of the many FSA photographs that showed the

domestic interiors of working class and migrant family shacks across the country.²⁹ The conditions of the Blankenships' shack are sparse and bleak. Rukeyser emphasizes the bareness of the shack and the meager furnishings in order to register the poverty and rootlessness of their living conditions. Essentially, the Blankenships live in temporary housing built in response to the demand for cheap labor at the construction site. And yet even within these transient conditions, Rukeyser points towards a domestic scene that attempts to survive amidst extreme poverty and sickness. The pictures on the wall of the Coliseum and Harper's Ferry and the dog-eared law book on the small table both show a personalization of the space, and reveal Rukeyser's political framing of the scene. The Coliseum and Harper's Ferry pictures encapsulate the opposing social forces that Rukeyser identifies within her film: the former symbolizing the forced degradation of human life and the latter recalling the promise of freedom from bondage exemplified by the John Brown raids. The dog-eared law book provides a detail about the personal lives of the Blankenships absent from "The Book of the Dead," suggesting that they are studying their legal options concerning possible recompense for Blankenship's silicosis and deliberating their future course of action against Union Carbide. The interior view of the shack thus gives an impression of life in Gauley Bridge that is not present within the documentary poem.

²⁹ For examples of FSA photography showing the interiors of American working class homes during the Depression, see Walker Evans, *American Photographs*, Part 1 (18, 23, 43-44) and *Documenting America, 1935-1943*, 114-28; 146-60, for photographs by Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein respectively. Roy Stryker, head of the Information Division of the FSA, stressed the importance of showing workers and those affected by the Depression within their homes as seen by his shooting scripts sent to all FSA photographers. The scripts "Home in the evening. Photographs showing the various ways that different income groups spend their evenings" and "The wall decorations in homes as an index to the different income groups and their reactions," show Stryker's concern with representing the domestic life during the Depression (*Proud Land* 187).

Rukeyser also departs from the Blankenship poem in “The Book of the Dead” by including a speaking role for Blankenship’s wife. The scene between husband and wife takes place over dinner, in which Blankenship’s worsening silicosis and loss of appetite prevents him from eating. Rukeyser includes sections of the letter as a voiceover to explain his medical situation:

The wife is still eating. Blankenship is pushed back, some of his food still on the plate, watching her. The sound of her eating, of the fork falling against the plate, of the salt being moved, of the coffee-pot set down, is all that is heard.

The wife looks up at Blankenship; an earnest, long-suffering look of question, a look of habit.

The wife: “Don’t you want it, Mearl?”

Blankenship, seen in close-up, opens his mouth for an answer. Flash to the table with the letter on it, and during the time taken by his answer, which is not heard, his voice reads:

Dear Sir, My name is Mearl Blankenship.

I have worked for the Rineheart & Dennis Co.

many days and many nights

and it was so dusty you couldn’t hardly see the lights (“GB” 56)

Rukeyser preserves the poetic form of the letter in her film sketches, but she presents its content in a strikingly different way. In “The Book of the Dead,” Rukeyser does not include Blankenship’s letter as an object within the poem. The text of the letter comprises the majority of “Mearl Blankenship” and the reader is able to see little outside of its content. Consequently, Blankenship appears in the testimonial mode in “The Book

of the Dead,” adding his sufferings along with the other workers throughout the poem. Yet in the film sketches, Rukeyser uses the letter’s content as a voiceover while placing it as an object on the table. Blankenship’s letter still has an explanatory function that it had in the poem, but it is not the sole source of information or action in the scene. By changing its role in the film, Rukeyser allows the audience to witness the domestic situation surrounding the letter. The letter becomes part of the conversation between Mearl and his wife when she asks: “And the letter? Have you finished it? Goin’ to send it off to the paper?” – indicating that the letter has the potential to inform others about their plight and possibly become a means of changing their circumstances (“GB” 57). In the poem Blankenship is only known through the text of the letter. In the film Rukeyser provides distance between him and the letter: it is a defined object within the scene, which he later mails at the post office (“GB” 59). Blankenship, although still gravely afflicted with silicosis, has more control over his fate in “Gauley Bridge.” From a mere testimonial voice in the poem, Rukeyser expands Blankenship’s character in the film sketches, illustrating in detail the life and hardship of a Gauley Bridge worker.

Such a refocusing and restructuring of the material inevitably downplayed the Popular Front ideology that motivated “The Book of the Dead.” In the scenes with Arthur Peyton and Mearl Blankenship, Rukeyser builds the political efficacy of the tunnel workers by showing their individual acts of protest and local activism against Union Carbide. The narrative scenes with character dialogue not only provide a sense of identity and place for the workers, but also develop their individual motivations and responses to the injustices perpetrated against them. As a result, the international framing of Gauley Bridge that played such a significant role in interpreting the political

importance of the tragedy within the poem, no longer operated as a factor within the documentary film sketches. Rukeyser further removed the film from the Popular Front by positioning it in a specifically American context. In “Gauley Bridge,” Rukeyser turns away from the Popular Front framing of “The Book of the Dead” and instead anchors her conception of the town within a narrative of migrant laborers as they follow agricultural and construction work. “This story,” Rukeyser writes in the sketch sent to Columbia Pictures, “is a chapter of the great American migration. It is not concerned with the westward sweep of the frontier-breakers, or, in our day, of the dust-bowl refugees – but rather with one of the shifts that feed and follow such sweeps. It is the shift that is seen as the boys from the West begin to travel East again, looking for something they have lost; of as the farmers of the Middle West crowd to the central cities in a hunt for something they have never found; or even in New York, as one-third of its population changes its address each year” (“C” 1).

Rukeyser’s reasons for dropping her internationalist approach to Gauley Bridge in favor of developing its relationship to “the great American migration” stem in part from the unraveling of the Popular Front following the Republican defeat in Spain and the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, which effectively ended the Soviet Union’s stance against fascism. The international promise that Rukeyser felt in Spain in 1936 had dissipated by the publication of her “Gauley Bridge” sketches in 1940. Additionally, the issue of American migrant workers reached a peak in national attention in 1940. Along with popular works of fiction such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, the U.S. government had established the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, popularly known as the Tolan Committee, “to study, survey and investigate the

social and economic needs and the movement of indigent persons across State lines, obtaining all facts possible . . . which would aid the House in enacted remedial legislation” (Part 1, 1). The information that emerged from the Tolan Committee proceedings presented a desperate picture of American migrant workers, whose increasing rootlessness and poverty allowed for their easy exploitation and inability to represent themselves, making it impossible to rise from their socioeconomic circumstances. The new context of American migrancy that Rukeyser emphasized for “Gauley Bridge” did not require a radical revisioning of the documentary material. The subcommittee hearings had previously shown that the construction of the hydroelectric dam at Gauley Bridge involved large numbers of migrant laborers. During the hearings Gilbert Love, a reporter for the Pittsburgh Press, stated that three-fourths of the construction workers were black migrant laborers who returned to the South after either falling sick or the completion of the hydroelectric dam (Subcommittee 78).³⁰ Rukeyser’s re-appraisal of Gauley Bridge against the backdrop of migration accentuated what was therefore already an important dimension to the industrial disaster.

Rukeyser expresses her focus on American migrancy through Juanita Tinsley, a member of the local Gauley Bridge committee. In the sketches she describes Tinsley,

³⁰ Dayton and Kadlec have argued that Rukeyser’s use of Popular Front ideology, and its focus on class issues and solidarity in “The Book of the Dead,” may have led her to downplay, or even intentionally elide, the racial dimensions of the tragedy. Given Rukeyser’s careful reading of the subcommittee hearings, evidenced by her use of excerpts, it is surprising that some of the more damning testimony on how Union Carbide treated the black workers is not included in the poem. Rukeyser’s film sketches offer an important view on this critical problem in that they emphasize the racial dimensions of Gauley Bridge more explicitly than “The Book of the Dead.” For example, in the Columbia film sketch, Rukeyser writes, “It is apparent that the Negroes are beginning to get sick in great numbers, more quickly and savagely than the white men have been attacked,” an assertion found in great frequency in the subcommittee hearings (“C” 8-9). She also writes that a town meeting held by the local committee to discuss silicosis “will be the first time they have broken the Jim Crow, except at their own small meetings” (“C” 13). The film sketches thus support the view that Rukeyser’s Popular Front politics, present in “The Book of the Dead,” but absent in “Gauley Bridge,” caused her to downplay the racial issues at work during the tragedy.

who has a greatly expanded role in the film as compared to the poem, as “the brightest girl in the high-school. She is fifteen, with a pale-glowing, luminous face, a village Joan of Arc” (“C” 10). The inspiring and redemptive qualities given to Tinsley emerge during a town meeting, in which she delivers a speech describing Gauley Bridge’s relationship to the national migrant population:

Juanita speaks to the town . . . it is up to them, whatever happens in the rest of the country – not to take the law in their own hands, but to make new law, to go on speaking, to be the voice of all the people who came in cars, and on the roads, and in box-cars, and went away sick, or stayed to die. They went away as they came, unknown and sick and lost; all wandering America, who wants to hear its voice and know itself. She is young and beautiful and fierce as she speaks. That kind of pride is felt. Blankenship knows: he has been inarticulate, and this speaks for him, too. (“C” 13).

Tinsley’s speech occupies an important role in the film, allowing the people of Gauley Bridge to understand the larger national context of the industrial tragedy. Their suffering is not an isolated incident, Tinsley argues, but reflects a broader trend of migrancy and exploitation within the United States. The labor migrations that made construction in Gauley Bridge possible were part of a thoroughly deracinated workforce, incapable of self-representation and the ability to fight for better wages and living conditions. The people who built the hydroelectric dam are, as Tinsley states, for the most part, unknown. Their anonymity makes it impossible to understand the full extent of the tragedy, as well as to assess the number of workers afflicted by occupational diseases. Additionally, the semi-permanent, class of migrants also has important ramifications for how America

conceptualizes itself as a nation. Tinsley indicates that the process of continual migration and anonymity is turning the United States into a “wandering” nation, increasingly bereft of an identity and knowledge of itself. The town and people of Gauley Bridge, through their story and testimony, thus have the potential to become the voice of the American worker who has been marginalized and rendered unknown. Rukeyser’s film as a critique of American dislocation and rootlessness completely inverted the ideology of the Popular Front in its longing for a rooted American culture. Through Tinsley’s speech, Rukeyser not only sets the daily struggles of the workers at the crux of the town’s portrayal, but she also attempts to re-inscribe a discrete sense of nation that had been downplayed in her internationalist approach in the poem.

Tinsley’s character is also important because of her membership in the local committee, which is more politically and socially active in “Gauley Bridge” than in “The Book of the Dead.” In the poem, Rukeyser lists its members and goals in the section “Praise of the Committee”:

The Committee meets regularly, wherever it can.

Here are Mrs. Jones, three lost sons, husband sick,

Mrs. Leek, cook for the bus cafeteria,

the men: George Robinson, leader and voice,

four other Negroes (three drills, one camp boy)

Blankenship, the thin friendly man, Peyton the engineer,

Juanita absent, the one outsider member (21).

The committee handles lawsuits brought against Union Carbide by workers living in Gauley Bridge, discusses relief efforts and the Senate silicosis bill, and tries to raise

awareness of silicosis in the local and national media. George Robinson, as the head of the committee, “holds all their strength together: / To fight the companies to make somehow a future” (22). Yet in the political and social schema of “The Book of the Dead” the local committee does not have a significant role. At the conclusion of the poem, Rukeyser places hope for the future in the recognition of the Popular Front and solidarity across different industries, occupations, and nations. None of the individual character vignettes in the documentary poem mention the actions of the local committee, and she ultimately limits its social relevance in the larger international scope of “The Book of the Dead.”

However, Rukeyser significantly expands the role of the local committee in “Gauley Bridge,” not only in their actions on behalf of the town, but also in their capacity to represent and give voice to all American migrant workers. In the final scene of the film, Rukeyser depicts a confrontation between the committee and the chief engineer of the hydroelectric dam and his girlfriend (“GB” 64; “C” 14). The committee, including Peyton, Blankenship, and Tinsley, stands silently in front of the couple, as the sound of vocal fragments, increasing in volume, is heard in the background. The voices, Rukeyser indicates, “pile up into a voice for this country and for all people. These have suffered; they have died; but many still fight, in the work and their words, and their children, for a further America of more meaning, more fairness, more love” (“C” 14). Although a hint of internationalism still attaches itself to the workers’ struggle, Rukeyser’s primary focus is upon the United States. She presents the tunnel workers of Gauley Bridge, those who have died and those who still live, as representatives for all American workers and families who have been maligned and victimized by the nation’s manufacturing

industries. The concatenation of sound amplifies the voices of the forgotten and anonymous workers, allowing their “fragments of speech” – unintelligible on their own – to resonate within the larger voice of protest.

The contrast between the conclusions of the film and the poem, and their respective uses of workers’ voices, are worth noting. In “The Book of the Dead,” Rukeyser included the living and deceased miners of Gauley Bridge into an international front of workers, strikers, and soldiers who fight on behalf of the global working class. The broad collection of laborers, Rukeyser states, have “Voices to speak to us directly, / As we move. / As we enrich, growing in larger motion, this word, this power” (72). Their voices spread the word of Spain, the horrors of Gauley Bridge, and speak on behalf of the silicosis victims numbering in the hundreds of thousands. The power of their collective speech animates the Popular Front, its partisans, and sympathizers, seen by Rukeyser as “growing in larger motion.” The workers’ voices at the conclusion of “Gauley Bridge,” however, are of a distinctly American hue. Their goal is no longer to “cry their doom across the world,” as in “The Book of the Dead,” but to change the American social fabric and justice system so that it treats all people, including lower class workers and migrants, with equity. Their collective speech at the end of the film attempts to give voice to the American workers who have been forgotten and lost. And ultimately, Rukeyser hopes that these voices, and the story of Gauley Bridge, can speak for the American nation itself.

Chapter 4

John Beecher's Documentary Poetics of the New Deal

Since his death in 1980, the poetry of John Beecher has largely been ignored and forgotten by literary historians and critics. To date, the only published scholarly work on Beecher is Foster Dickson's *The Life and Poetry of John Beecher* (2009). Dickson's book presents a brief overview of Beecher's life and socially oriented poetry, as well as an examination into why Beecher has not been recognized within 20th century American literary studies. Dickson argues that Beecher was not only overlooked by his modernist contemporaries in the 1930s due to his lack of technical artifice, but also he suffered from being branded as a topical political poet by literary critics after World War II.¹ As the great-grand nephew of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher, John Beecher self-consciously cast himself into the role of a social and political activist and poet, writing about labor issues, racial inequality, and the problems of American democracy. Beecher inflected his poetics with a strong conversational style, often delivering his subject matter through patterns of speech. It is his perceived lack of consideration toward the formal aspects of his poetry that has led to a general denunciation of his work by critics. The most notorious example is Marjorie Perloff's exceedingly negative evaluation of Beecher in her "Tradition and the Individual Talent – A Review Essay." She states that Beecher's poetry exhibits "no structuring of any sort here, whether imagistic, prosodic, syntactic, or verbal, no process of selection from the welter of words which constitutes ordinary speech" – ultimately concluding that Beecher "cannot

¹ See Dickson's discussion of Beecher's absence from 20th century American literary studies (58-59).

properly be called a poet” (Perloff).² Perloff also takes aim at Beecher’s politics and social viewpoints, arguing that they are unrealistic and “touchingly simplistic” as delivered by his direct speech style (Perloff). Quoting from Beecher’s “And I Will Be Heard: Two Talks to the American People” (1940), she writes:

Even as rhetoric, these poems fail. In 1940, he writes that the way to stop Hitler is to build up “American unity” by helping the “ill housed / ill-clothed / ill-fed,” by making sure everyone has “a fair wage” and “a decent place to live in,” by remembering that “all men are created equal” and that Whites must stop mistreating Blacks. One cannot quarrel with such lofty sentiments, but one never feels that Beecher has grounded these sentiments in real situations or that he understands the complexities of history, politics, or social change. Accordingly, this is verse which has not stood the test of time (Perloff).

For Perloff, Beecher’s style and rhetoric simplifies the political problems of his time and the process of social change necessary to solve them. As a result, his solutions lack a realistic, pragmatic approach, according to Perloff, and remain utopian and “lofty.”

However, Perloff’s dismissal of Beecher’s political acuity and poetic style need to be reassessed in light of his social work and activism. Through the Depression and into the war years, Beecher worked a number of jobs in the New Deal, from improving the conditions of the Florida migrant workers’ camps for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), to investigating racial discrimination in the Southern war industries for the Fair

² Perloff also categorically argues against Beecher’s status as a poet, writing: “Whatever our definition of *poetry* – as language inherently different from ordinary speech, as fictive discourse, as the phenomenological embodiment of the writer’s unique consciousness, or as the displacement of myth – Beecher cannot properly be called a ‘poet’” (Perloff).

Employment Practices Committee (FEPC).³ Beecher's poetry often made use of his investigative work and first hand experiences as a New Deal administrator, documenting the struggle and hardship of the unemployed. His New Deal documentary poems, in particular, address the racial inequality that he witnessed within the government relief works and projects. Drawing from the abolitionist spirit of his family's past and extending their push for racial justice, Beecher's poetry examined the successes and failures of the government's initiatives to improve the lives of all unemployed workers, regardless of race. As war became imminent at the end of the 30s, and New Deal employment programs increasingly shifted toward mobilization of manpower for war production, Beecher saw the fight against fascism as a means for realizing racial equality within the United States. For Beecher, the prospect of blacks and whites working together in the war industries with the intention of defeating the racist totalitarian ideologies of the Axis powers had the potential to both promote racial justice through equal employment and powerfully articulate the promise of American democracy. Yet despite the government measures to ensure racial integration, deeply entrenched racial prejudice prevented blacks from entering the growing war industries in the South en masse. Beecher's documentary poetry during his time as a regional administrator for the FEPC in the South registers his disappointment with the repeated obstruction of integration in the war industries and marks his conflict with industry and government officials who wished to project a false image of racial integration.

³ See "John Beecher Biography," *John Beecher Papers, 1899-1972*, Reel 1. Beecher worked in North Carolina (1934-35) and Mississippi (1935) for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration; in Alabama (1936) for the Resettlement Administration; in the Florida migrant camps (1939-40) for the Farm Security Administration; and investigated Southern war industries for the Fair Employment Practice Committee (1941-43).

The form of Beecher's poetic documentary, which employs a direct speech style, is intimately related to his personal pursuit for racial justice and the resistance he encountered while working for the New Deal. Contrary to Perloff's description of his poetics as a "welter of words which constitutes ordinary speech," Beecher carefully crafted his straightforward poetic voice to evoke an ethos of testimonial writing. The speech patterns in Beecher's poetry must be seen as a deliberate form of social rhetoric meant to embody the authority of the witness, while appealing to the widest possible audience. Orality is essential to understanding both Beecher's poetics and his sense of social responsibility.⁴ Reading Beecher, it is clear that the projected voice is the most important and defining aspect of his poetry. Beecher used his oral poetic style to confront and condemn social injustice directly and present information and anecdotes to make his audience aware of racial inequality. The direct speech of Beecher's New Deal poems gives the testimonial voice a documentary function, intended both to expose and educate its audience about the incongruence between the racially integrated image of the war effort versus its segregated reality. Ultimately, the recovery of John Beecher's work not only restores an important poet long neglected in American literary studies, but also expands our understanding of documentary poetry as an oral art.

John Beecher worked a number of New Deal relief and resettlement jobs from 1934-1943. In particular, his work as state supervisor for the Florida Migratory Labor Program received significant attention from the federal government. From 1939-40, Beecher headed an investigation of the working and living conditions of agricultural migrant workers living in Florida. He presented his research and findings in August 1940

⁴ Dickson argues that, "With respect to his forms, John Beecher believed that poetry is an art form meant to be read out loud, and this is especially evident in his longer poems with widely varying line lengths that break at natural breaths" (Dickson 64).

at the Tolan Committee hearings in Montgomery, established “to study, survey, and investigate the social and economic needs” of interstate migrants and “destitute citizens.”⁵ His report described the lives of the Florida workers, providing information about the education system available in the camps, the health and diet of the migrants, their wages and salary, and the social life of their communities. In order to combat the worsening conditions in the camps, Beecher utilized the resources of the FSA to plan and construct better living facilities, hospitals, and community centers. His investigation revealed both the hardships the workers endured and touched upon the larger exploitative system of agricultural labor that had spread across the United States. Beecher opened his report with a detailed description of a migrant family working in Belle Glade in South Florida. His account of the family showed their widespread routes of migration and revealed to what extent people were willing to travel for work. Beecher stated:

Originally from Georgia, their wanderings had taken them over practically the entire country during the previous three years. The family head figured he had actually worked in 29 states during that period. In the last twelve months he had averaged one interstate move a month. At Christmas time the family had been in an F.S.A. camp in the Imperial Valley of California, near the Mexican line. Three months later they turned up over 3,000 miles away at the opposite geographic extreme of the country, having crossed Arizona, New Mexico, Texas – with a stop-over in the lower Rio Grande Valley for a few week’s work – Louisiana,

⁵ See *Interstate migration: Hearings before the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, House of Representatives, Seventy-sixth Congress, third session, pursuant to H. Res. 63 and H. Res. 491, resolution to inquire into the interstate migration of destitute citizens, to study, survey and investigate the social and economic needs and the movement of indigent persons across state lines* (1940). In chronological order, Tolan’s committee heard testimony in New York City, Montgomery, Chicago, Lincoln, NE, Oklahoma City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C.

Mississippi, Alabama, and about 700 miles of Florida down to Lake Okeechobee [Belle Glade] . . . [L]ike most of the farm migrants, they are not following the crops because they like to, they are doing it because they have to, to live (Migration 519).

In his report, Beecher offers this family as just one example of the numerous groups of people that constitute the migrant labor communities of Florida. Industrial agriculture, Beecher argued, relies upon the rootlessness of the migrant workers, and their ability to travel across the country in order to follow opportunities to work. When asked whether he witnessed any “abuses of private employment” regarding the movements of the migrant workers, Beecher replied: “We find a great many [migrants], particularly the Negroes, are transported by labor contractors in trucks from place to place, and, of course, it is to the interest usually of these labor contractors to have a surplus of labor on hand, and naturally that keeps the wage rates down” (Migration 535). Essentially, Beecher reports that the large populations of migrant workers are not only a function of the economic depression, but also deliberately formed and exploited by agricultural businesses.

The rapid expansion of migrant workforces needed for cheap labor often accompanied a lack of basic services and health care, inadequate housing, and a poor educational system for children. As a result, workers and their families lived, according to Beecher, “under substandard conditions which are perhaps without parallel in the United States” (Migration 538). He also touches upon the racial dimension to the migrant situation, stating that black workers are more likely to be victims of worker exploitation than whites. Although the lack of services extended to all migrant workers

in Florida, Beecher shows how the black workers are disproportionately affected. In terms of housing, black workers and their families lived in overcrowded barracks, which were often filthy and unsanitary.⁶ Usually these barracks did not have access to water and the workers had to purchase it through a rent increase. Black children were not provided proper educational resources and usually worked in the fields during the various crop harvestings. Beecher reported that in one particular school for black migrant children the enrollment dropped from 485 to 20 when the beans returned following a freeze that affected the crop (Migration 540). Additionally, health services for black workers were also found lacking and contributed to the spread of infectious diseases throughout the camps. Local physicians and health officials, according to Beecher, estimated the rate of syphilis and other venereal diseases in the camps for black workers at 50 percent.

For Beecher, the continued lack of resources, education, and health care for migrant workers, spanning most of the 1930s and into the 40s, had led to their outsider social status and ultimate disenfranchisement. The migrant worker in the United States, according to his report, lack basic political representation both at the local and national levels. Extreme poverty and the inability to escape their social environment effectively render the migrants as second-class citizens. Beecher writes, “Into whatever community the migrant goes his status is the lowest in the social scale. His labor is welcome but he is not. He and his family are feared as possible sources of physical and moral contagion, and even more as possible public charges should they become stranded there. In no sense

⁶ Beecher cites an FSA source in his report to the Tolson Committee which describes the living conditions for a typical black migrant family: “The family lives in 1 room of a 14-room filthy barracks, the 3 children all have cold and are filthy, crying most of the time. Garbage is emptied in yard 10 feet from front door, flies by the hundreds” (Migration 538).

does the migrant 'belong' — he has no political rights and his civil rights have proved to be more theoretical than real" (Migration 536). Beecher's report to the Tolson Committee shows a growing class of laborers who are not integrated into mainstream American life. Not only are they not welcome within the communities in which they live and work, but most importantly, they have very little recourse to the basic political rights afforded by the government. Beecher remarks on the effects this process may have on future generations of migrant workers. His commentary presents a scenario in which increasing migrant labor begins to change the definition of American identity. Beecher asks:

What sort of Americans are migrant children growing up to be? Their way of life is completely alien to the traditional American way of life. We may very well be breeding aliens out of the descendants of pioneers. Like the recent migrants to the Pacific coast, the migrants of the South are overwhelmingly farm refugees. Formerly they were settled farm people . . . Soil depletion through erosion rather than drought, the reduction of cotton acreage and mechanization have completely displaced a great number while a greater number have been pushed down from tenancy to the status of wage laborers employed but a few months of the year (Migration 537).

In essence, Beecher describes a process by which migrant labor transforms American citizens into rootless non-entities. The spreading form of industrial agriculture strips political citizenship and representation from the migrant worker, replacing it with a nomadic way of life. As the national population of migrant workers grows, Beecher implies that social and political stratification will increase within the United States. Thus through his report, he reveals that the migrant situation is not simply a resource problem,

but also an issue that has the potential to degrade democratic representation for millions of Americans.

However, Beecher holds out hope for the migrant workers in his testimony, arguing that their fate of becoming aliens within America has not been foreclosed. Beecher sees the process of political and social rehabilitation at work in the FSA's construction of better houses and planned communities. He relates to the Tolan Committee that within the newly constructed, sanitary camps, the migrant workers are able to organize themselves politically. "They are the camp council," Beecher relates: "they elect their own representatives and they have universal suffrage in the camp, the men and women vote and they put their own members in the council, and that council rules the camp" (Migration 544). The improved living quarters and health and education facilities, according to Beecher, allow the migrant workers to exercise self-governance and form a participatory democracy — one that begins their re-integration into the larger social life of the county. Thus in the concluding section titled "Need For More Migrant Camps," Beecher writes: "Our experience with [the workers] is conclusive proof that migrants in Florida . . . show themselves to be good Americans where they are given a fair chance" (Migration 552). The report to the Tolan Committee shows two possible futures for the migrant worker: that of being integrated into American life and democracy and the fate of being an alien in one's own country. For Beecher, the relief work in Florida reveals to what extent political and civil codes determine American identity and the social consequences arising from their erosion.

Beecher's ideas and concepts within the Tolan testimony concerning American identity and integration are central to his documentary poem of the same year, "And I

Will Be Heard: Two Talks to the American People.” Beecher structured the poem as a straightforward discussion of the political and social problems facing the United States in 1940. The title of the two poetic “talks” in part borrows from an editorial written by William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*. Beecher opens the poem with an account of Garrison’s struggle against anti-abolitionist forces in establishing the newspaper and incorporates text from his forthright editorial, “To the Public” (1831), which argued for full emancipation and enfranchisement of the slave population. Beecher uses the quotation from Garrison to set the importance and immediacy for his own talks:

[Garrison] said

“I am in earnest” —

and he said

“I will not equivocate” —

(meaning that he would not say slavery was on the one hand bad

but on the other hand good depending on how you looked at it

which was the way the politicians were mostly talking then

just as they are now)

and he said

“I will not retreat a single inch” —

“And I will be heard”

he said (53).⁷

⁷ In “To the Public,” the sentence that Beecher is quoting from reads: “I am in earnest – I will not equivocate — I will not excuse — I will not retreat a single inch — AND I WILL BE HEARD.” All page numbers given for Beecher’s poetry are from his *Collected Poems: 1924-1974*.

Garrison's defiant and uncompromising attitude provides Beecher with the moral purpose and rhetorical force that underpins his direct speech style in "Two Talks to the American People." The concern with social rights and racial justice that embodies Garrison's work is continued in Beecher's poetic talks. Incorporating material from his experiences in Florida, Beecher highlights how racial violence still operates, seemingly unchecked by legal authorities or law enforcement. The utterance "And I will be heard," used in Beecher's title, is thus significant, both in terms of its historical importance in the abolitionist movement and its personal declaration of moral indignation. The "I" in Beecher's poem, as filtered through the history of social justice movements, attempts to build the authority of the witness by employing a stripped down poetic discourse and using documentary materials.

In the second talk, "Think It Over, America," Beecher includes an account of the murder of Willie Hall, a disabled black man, by a white farm worker. The murder took place during Beecher's time in Florida working for the FSA, according to the opening lines of the account. The description of the murder, however, is not Beecher's — as indicated by the italicized text — but a writer who he identifies as "a Negro tractor driver" (73). Beecher leaves all the grammatical mistakes and idiosyncrasies within the text in an effort to emphasize its authenticity: "*Gathered Facts about the Brutal killing of Willie Hall. / Shot Friday evening January 12th, 1940 2*"45 P.M. by Henry / Collins A white Man serving in the capacity of A Forman / for Mr. H. Chanler big farmer in Belle Glade, Florida" (72). The local report of Hall's death goes on to relate the cold-bloodedness of the murder and the unwillingness of the local police to arrest Collins. The black citizens of Belle Glade, in an attempt to get justice for Hall, hired a lawyer to

prosecute the case. Although a warrant was eventually served for Collins' arrest, the report goes on to say:

*Collins Never was arrested Neither put in Jail The County Solicitor
did not want the case to come in his courts and Abuse the Lawer
for excepting a case to Prosecute a white Man for killing A nigger
with Fifteen witnesses testifying in the defince of Willie Hall
the Soliciter through the Case out (72).*

The episode between Hall and Collins provides an explicitly violent dimension to Beecher's Tolan Committee testimony concerning the Florida migrant camps. The dispute between the two men, as related in the report, arose within the context of the daily search for day laborers. As Beecher quotes the tractor driver: "*on [Hall's] way home in the colored section he was ask if he wanted / to work he stated that he had just come in off the job / Collins said to him you Niggers are just trying to dodge / work got out of his truck advancing toward Willie with a wrecking / bar*" (72). Collins later shot Willie Hall as he sat on his front porch. Whether or not Beecher had this report when giving his testimony to the Tolan Committee is unclear. However the episode, as presented in the documentary poem, has a different social import than the overall mission of the Tolan Committee. Rather than focusing on the murder of Willie Hall solely as a moment of tension and violence within the Florida migrant communities, Beecher uses the report in "Two Talks to the American People" to argue that the propagation of racial segregation and injustice have dire consequences for ideas of American unity and motivation for national defense. For Beecher, this is particularly important given the international political climate of 1940 and the undeniable global threat that totalitarianism presented.

Events like Hall's murder, which demonstrate a racist two-tiered legal system and unequal application of civil rights, make it difficult to draw support from the oppressed for a possible future conflict, according to Beecher. After the example of Willie Hall, he writes:

Now I ask you
 fair-minded people
 loyal Americans
 how would you feel about America
 if you were a southern Negro
 and believed you belonged to the human family
 and yet got treated
 just like Hitler treats the Jews? (74)

Beecher's comparison between racial violence and segregation in the United States and Nazi Germany is not only meant to bring racism within America into greater relief, but also to show the moral hypocrisy of undertaking a war effort against fascism while remaining racially segregated.

In "Two Talks to the American People," the threat of imminent war frames the social concerns embedded within Beecher's documentary poem. Using his conversational speech style, Beecher announces his intentions directly to his reading and listening audience: "My name is John Beecher / and I am writing this piece / mainly about what goes on inside of me / and what I am thinking on May 22, 1940 / when the invasion from Mars has really started" (53). The "invasion from Mars" refers to H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, in which Martian forces overrun the planet Earth. The

timestamp that Beecher provides for his poetic talks, May 22, 1940, is an important indicator as to how he is using the reference to Wells. Within the context of World War II, Germany had already invaded France twelve days prior to the date Beecher gives for his talks – an invasion that took the Allied forces by surprise. The eventual victory in France meant Nazi control of the continent and a weakening of England’s military position against Germany and Italy. Beecher’s talks, therefore, address the American public as to the very real possibility of being drawn into another world conflict.⁸ His personal framing of the talks — providing his name as a reference and stating that the poem will draw from his own social and political perceptions — amplifies his position as a witness and embodies his physical presence within the work. Through his poetic voice Beecher establishes himself as the roving documentarian of the New Deal, arguing for the connection between strong social services, full extension of civil rights, and national defense:

I say
 America’s first line of defense
 is in our own backyard.
 In March 1933
 we started really cleaning up
 and all we’ve managed to do in seven years

⁸ In 1940, Beecher was not alone in framing his concerns about the seeming inevitability of war in a work to the “American People.” William C. Bullitt, Ambassador to France, published his speech about his experiences escaping the war in a work titled *Report to the American People* (1940). In his report, originally delivered at Independence Hall to the American Philosophical Society, Bullitt argues for increased war production and mobilization, and admonishes American isolationism. He writes that the isolationists “misunderstand the entire nature of the Nazi system. It is not organized to develop an empire in peace. It is organized as a dynamic military machine. The ruthless hold of the Nazi leaders on the German people is based on the gearing of all energies for the sacrifices necessary to wage war . . . The German nation has been made a predatory army of assault. Its organization is military. Its military operations have enormous momentum. It cannot stop in its tracks. It can only *be* stopped” (15-16).

is get going on that big job.

Don't believe the baloney

about how the billions for battleships

will leave us so busted

we have got to economize on slum clearance and old age pensions

and workers' wages.

[. . .]

I say

we can't afford to stop a single thing

we have started

to make this American democracy we have been talking about ever since 1776

come really true.

We have got to step it up.

We have got to give the American people

such a stake in America

they will fight for America

like Washington's men did (70-71).

For Beecher, the New Deal public works projects and employment programs support national defense by improving social conditions and infrastructure within the United States. Solving domestic problems such as the destitute state of large migrant worker populations, or the vast number of the unemployed, not only increases national stability,

but also, according to Beecher, makes it possible to raise morale for the war effort.⁹ Additionally, he argues that the New Deal employment programs also have the potential to fulfill the promise of “American democracy” by providing all citizens with equal opportunities, regardless of class or race. For Beecher, the United States in 1940 is perilously close to becoming socially and racially stratified through its seemingly permanent class of migrant workers and institutional acceptance of racism toward African-Americans. If accelerated and stepped up, the relief efforts of the New Deal could rectify these problems, if implemented with racial and social integration in mind. Beecher thus presents the New Deal as holding the potential fulfillment of total and complete democracy within the United States.

The publication of “Two Talks to the American People” by Dorothy Norman’s *Twice a Year* press brought a good amount of attention to Beecher’s work. Norman had founded *Twice a Year* in 1938 with editor Mary Lescaze, describing the publication as a “journal of literature, the arts, and civil liberties — in book form” on the cover of each issue. Beecher’s talks fit Norman’s interest in matters of race and civil rights and the larger relationship they had to democracy. Although “Two Talks to the American People” did not have a large print run, Beecher still received praise from writers and poets. Perhaps the most notable of these was a letter from William Carlos Williams, discussing what he perceived as the merits of Beecher’s work. Williams writes:

The publication of such works is very necessary. No matter what may be their effect as works of art, and they have a place there too, their voicing of the public mind is their great virtue. This is a man who speaks for the conscience of the

⁹ For more on the reorganization of the New Deal employment and work-training programs in the service of the war effort, see Smith 190-232. Smith argues that, “the threat of war appeared to many liberal to offer the possibility of recharging and strengthening the reforming impulse of the New Deal (203).”

people. It is a special sort of writing whose basic honesty, lack of pretence and posturing is American at the foundations . . . He uses colloquial turns of phrase for a sort of effect he wants to achieve. Well, observation, information and wit are the essence of such a style. It's [sic] force comes from the acuity of the vision and the sharpness of statement, the freshness of the phrasing, the paragraphing for dramatic effect in the best sense, the firmness of the sentences.¹⁰

Williams' comments on Beecher's work are interesting in that he openly doubts the aesthetic qualities of the poetic talks while praising the rhetorical force of his direct speech style. Williams makes an explicit connection between Beecher oral poetics and American populism, arguing that Beecher's tone and writing project the voice "of the public mind" and "the conscience of the people." The style that Williams identifies in the talks strongly reflects a sharp, declamatory voice – one that is meant to be heard and be rooted in the language of everyday speech. Beecher largely agreed with Williams' assessment in reply, writing that in "Two Talks to the American People," he attempted to adhere to "my basic aim of making myself understood by practically everybody," and that he was "looking forward to finding out how flexible the American vernacular is, because I propose to stick to it as closely as I can."¹¹ Ultimately, Beecher's oral poetic form, which he claimed to be deeply rooted in natural speech patterns and the American vernacular, is inseparable from its documentary content of Beecher's experiences. The ability to document the lives of everyday, working-class Americans, and details of working various New Deal jobs, require, according to Beecher, a rhetoric and form that can closely adhere to its subject matter.

¹⁰ Letter from Williams to Dorothy Norman, November 23, 1940. *John Beecher Papers*, Reel 4.

¹¹ Letter from Beecher to Williams, November 29, 1940. *John Beecher Papers*, Reel 4.

Beecher's direct speech documentary style also brought him into the orbit of key American documentary film directors who took an interest in his work. In a letter to his wife in January 1941, Beecher recounts Ralph Steiner's interest in "Two Talks to the American People," and the possibility of doing work in documentary film: "Just talked to Dorothy Norman. She says Ralph Steiner, the great photographer & documentary film guy thought my pamphlet ["Two Talks"] was sump'n & wants to talk to me about doing texts & being the narrator of same. Hurray!"¹² By 1941, Steiner was a veteran documentary filmmaker, having co-founded the film group Nykino along with Willard Van Dyke, Paul Strand, and Irving Lerner in 1935 (Barsam 147). Through Nykino, Steiner had worked in production for Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke The Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937). Additionally, he was a founding member of Frontier Films, which released Joris Iven's Spanish Civil War documentary *Heart of Spain* (1937), as well as produced *People of the Cumberland* (1938) (Campbell 155). Steiner, along with Van Dyke, had also recently produced his most famous documentary *The City*, which had been released to great acclaim at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City (Barsam 166).

Interestingly enough, Steiner, without having previously met Beecher, not only wanted him to write documentary narratives for films, but he wanted Beecher to do the voiceovers as well. He could have only received an indication of Beecher's vocal capacities from the poetry itself. Steiner's appraisal of the voice within "Two Talks to the American People" demonstrates the careful consideration Beecher gave to developing the voice, and its projection, within his documentary poetry. Although by 1941, American documentary filmmakers had begun to employ dramatic settings for their films rather than use voiceover driven montage, there was still a large market for the voiceover

¹² Letter to Virginia Beecher, January 14, 1941. *John Beecher Papers*, Reel 4.

documentary film.¹³ Beecher's careful construction of his poetic voice and authoritative mode of witness, in Steiner's assessment, could be easily adapted as voiceover material for documentary films. Steiner and Beecher had several conversations and meetings following his initial favorable view of the talks, expressing a serious interest in having Beecher work on documentary films. Beecher wasted no time in speaking with Steiner after getting the initial word from Dorothy Norman:

I called Ralph Steiner. . .this morning following up on what Dorothy Norman told me about his liking the pamphlet ["Two Talks"] so much. . . Steiner liked it & sent a number of copies over to the Association for Documentary Films with the suggestion that I might be a good guy to write narratives & say 'em for documentary films. Something may come of this — Friday I am invited to go to a special showing of documentary films at the Museum of Modern Art with Dorothy Norman & there I will meet Steiner and others.¹⁴

However, Beecher's connection with Steiner and the Association of Documentary Film Producers was short-lived. His correspondence with his wife, Virginia, paints a situation in which his "Two Talks to the American People" is ultimately rejected as material for a documentary film due to its political viewpoints. Beecher first noted these problems at a dinner party held at Otto Hagel's apartment soon after his initial conversations with Steiner. Hagel was a photographer for *Life* and had invited other documentary photographers from the magazine to attend, such as Andre Capa and Peter Stackpole. At

¹³ See Chapter 3 for an extensive discussion of this transition in American documentary film.

¹⁴ Letter to Virginia Beecher, January 15, 1941. *John Beecher Papers*, Reel 4. The Association for Documentary Films had been formed by Mary Losey in 1939, as an attempt to catalogue and consolidate the vast number of American and international documentary filmmakers working at the time. The Association had no overarching political or aesthetic philosophy, and therefore was open to a wide range of filmmakers and documentaries covering all kinds of subjects. For more on the Association see *Living Films* and Barsam 219.

some point during the party Beecher was asked to read from his talks. The reception was icy. In a letter to Virginia, Beecher explained why he thought this was so:

I gathered that they were all Party Liners and hence couldn't get overly enthusiastic. It appears that the head of the Documentary Film Producers is also a Party Liner, so I guess I can expect nothing to develop there in spite of Ralph Steiner's intercession. I was told the last time I was here that the way to get ahead in literary and artistic circles around NY was to line up. That seemed preposterous at the time, but maybe it isn't. Not that I'm going to. God, if there were only some other alternative to the vague, discouraging, undisciplined wash of New Deal liberalism.¹⁵

Beecher uses the phrase "Party Liner" again when describing a meeting with Willard Van Dyke the following day: "met the Shot in documentary, Willard Van Dyke, who pretended he had never heard of me although I knew damn well he had, so the advance dope must be correct, another Party Liner. Anyhow he says there is nothing stirring in documentary, no money to be had to do social films, nobody interested in distributing them after they are done. So we can forget all about that."¹⁶

It is not entirely clear what Beecher means by "Party Liner" or "New Deal liberalism." Nor is it a foregone conclusion that Beecher's "Two Talks to the American People" was rebuffed due to its political content. However, what Beecher seems to suggest is that his poetic talks were too controversial and that its content broke from the New Deal Democratic Party line. The overall connection that Beecher makes between the New Deal public works and the war effort was not controversial: by early 1941 the

¹⁵ Letter to Virginia Beecher, January 16, 1941. *John Beecher Papers*, Reel 4.

¹⁶ Letter to Virginia Beecher, January 18, 1941. *John Beecher Papers*, Reel 4.

WPA had placed approximately 500,000 people on defense projects and New Deal employment programs had shifted toward job training for war production industries (Smith 207). What might have led to reservations on the part of his audience at Otto Hagel's was Beecher's portrayal of racism and the implications it had for American patriotism and identity. At the end of the second talk, Beecher argues that prolonged racism against African-Americans could lead to their indifferent stance toward fascism:

America hasn't bothered to educate them about Hitler
 but America hasn't bothered to educate them about America either
 and since they haven't had much education
 they have had to use their eyes
 and use their heads
 and they have got the idea
 that America doesn't mean them
 that when we say *all men*
have certain inalienable rights
 we don't mean they have
 and when we say
all men were created equal
 we mean white men (81).

In this passage, Beecher deliberately conflates Nazi racist ideology and racism within the United States in order to show the moral hypocrisy of engaging in war against a totalitarian regime without addressing the horrors of racial violence at home. By using a foundational American text, "The Declaration of Independence," he argues that the

concepts of *equality* and *inalienable rights* that serve as hallmarks of American political thought actually encode racial separation and violence in practice. Beecher's phrasing of this point is especially important: the lines, "and when we say / *all men are created equal* / we mean white men" are meant to invoke an ideology similar to the Aryan racial thinking operating in Germany at the time. This direct comparison between Germany and the United States concerning racism most likely turned potential advocates of Beecher's work into detractors. The correspondence with Virginia shows that in addition to the rejection of the documentary filmmakers, editors were also reluctant to print his talks because of the racial content. A key example is Beecher's meeting with Paul Kellogg, editor of *Survey Graphic*, in which Kellogg declined to print sections of "Two Talks to the American People." Beecher writes: "Last night Paul Kellogg spent two hours and a half telling me why he didn't want to take my ms. A very fine poem of course, of course, but at this time it might do harm to a movement which we both wished to advance, etc. etc. Of course he was not rejecting my ms. If I wanted to leave it with him to check with the NAACP and the Interracial Commission and Tuskegee . . . they still might take it."¹⁷

This would not be the last time Beecher's outspoken views on race relations in America or his documentary poetry would create tension between himself and people working within, and allied to, the New Deal. The connection between democratic equality, segregation and war mobilization in Beecher's work became all the more pervasive when he began working for FDR's newly established Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) in early 1942 (Reed 25). Roosevelt established the FEPC on June 25, 1941 in order to address the problems of racism within war industries as the

¹⁷ Letter to Virginia Beecher, January 21, 1941. *John Beecher Papers*, Reel 4.

United States moved closer to world conflict. The primary role of the committee was “to encourage full participation in the national defense program by all citizens of the United States, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, in the firm belief that the democratic way of life within the Nation can be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders” (FDR).¹⁸ The mission of the FEPC was closely related to Beecher’s “Two Talks to the American People,” especially in its explicit connection between democracy and national defense. Beecher eagerly began work as a FEPC field representative in the South, investigating, in particular, racism and discrimination within war industries in Alabama and Georgia.¹⁹

However, Beecher encountered extensive difficulties in imposing the mandates of the FEPC in southern war manufacturing plants. Production was valued over racial integration, and the FEPC investigations were largely seen as nuisances. In a letter to Virginia, Beecher describes the scenario he confronted in Louisiana:

Soldiers and sailors everywhere you look these days. New Orleans is jammed with them. The sense of things being rapidly militarized is deepened and deepened as I go about. The sort of thing I’m working on is given the quick brush-off by most people I talk to. Hell, they seem to think, so long as we’re getting the planes and ships built, what does it matter whether niggers helped build them? I really don’t know what I’m accomplishing, except self-education, which perhaps is something. The government really isn’t going to make these

¹⁸ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “Executive Order 8802.” June 25, 1941.

¹⁹ Beecher’s investigations for the FEPC took him through a number of states, including Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and Florida, in the first half of 1942.

folks do anything I'm afraid, so long as they succeed in the basic job of producing armaments.²⁰

Beecher indicates that the problem isn't simply with the people managing the war industries. Rather, as Beecher writes, the government ineffectually mandates fair hiring practices so long as production demands are met. Consequently, Beecher's job with the FEPC was at times almost impossible to accomplish, especially when government officials weren't merely indifferent or passive to racial integration in war industries, but adamantly in favor of racially motivated hiring practices. Beecher continually met resistance both at the level of industry and government — experiences that would make him question whether the FEPC was structural capable of alleviating the problems of racial integration.

One such experience was Beecher's disastrous interview with Frank H. Neely, chairman of the Atlanta Federal Reserve and the regional director of the War Production Board (WPB) — the bureau that oversaw the FEPC. In a memo written to Larry Cramer, the executive secretary for the FEPC, Beecher recounts the harsh criticism he received from Neely concerning his investigations and the proposed hearings on hiring practices to be scheduled in Birmingham.²¹ Neely strongly objected to the FEPC hearings in Birmingham, and refused “to commit the WPB in any way with regard to paying for office space already occupied or the stenographer already employed for the [FEPC's] work in Birmingham.”²² Neely also made it clear to Beecher that production was valued

²⁰ Letter to Virginia Beecher, February 16, 1942. *John Beecher Papers*, Reel 5.

²¹ The culmination of Beecher's investigations was a series of hearings held in Birmingham on June 18-20, 1942, in which a comprehensive account of hiring practices in Southern wartime industries was given. See Reed 65-76.

above racial integration. Beecher remarks that during the interview, Neely “held out a detonator which he had been playing with while taking and flatly stated that it was his sole interest to get maximum production of such things.”²³ Moreover, according to Neely, any interference with war production, including investigations and allegations of racism, should be considered un-American and seditious:

Mr. Neely went on to condemn the agitation about racial discrimination which was being carried on in “the Negro press and the columns of Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt.” This campaign, he asserted, had its indubitable origin in the propaganda departments of the Axis nations. . . As our conversation continued, Mr. Neely repeatedly returned to this theme, that the widespread complaints of discrimination were not spontaneous, but were inspired and fomented by enemy agents. He clearly associated, by implication, the work of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice with enemy activity.²⁴

Neely’s comments about potential Axis ties to the FEPC are remarkable not only because they postulate an elaborate international conspiracy theory, but they also fundamentally link American victory and patriotism with racism. The unequal political and civil status of blacks in America, according to Neely, is a necessary reality to be stomached for the fight against the Axis powers. In essence, Neely’s statements and actions were nothing less than an institutionalization of discrimination. Furthermore, the discrimination was

²² Memo to Lawrence Cramer, April 30, 1942. “Office Files of John Beecher,” in the Headquarters Records of the FEPC, Reel 77.

²³ Memo to Cramer, April 30, 1942.

²⁴ Memo to Cramer, April 30, 1942.

located within war production — an industry that for Beecher represented the fullest possibilities for democracy.

Beecher's problems with his superiors became worse after his transfer to New York City as the regional examiner for the NY FEPC in July 1942.²⁵ Oversight of the FEPC had shifted in July from the WPB to the War Manpower Commission (WMC), headed by Paul V. McNutt. McNutt took complete control of FEPC investigations and activities, essentially ending the relative independence the committee had under the WPB.²⁶ Beecher felt the pressure within his New York office, writing to his parents that, "I'm finding plenty of discrimination against Negroes, Jews, aliens, etc. and having perhaps more trouble with government agencies than with employers."²⁷ Beecher's office also faced budget cuts, which caused him to cut back on highly needed clerks and investigators to fulfill the responsibilities of the FEPC.

In addition to the bureaucratic control he exerted on the FEPC, McNutt also took measures to consolidate the image and purpose of the newly remade Committee under the WMC. To accomplish this, McNutt wrote a short documentary film titled *Manpower*. Released on October 29, 1942, and produced by the U.S. Office of War Information, *Manpower* warned of the shortage of war industry workers, and presented the steps the WMC were taking in order to solve the labor shortage problems. McNutt himself makes a cameo in the film, arguing that the problem of war labor could be met if government,

²⁵ "John Beecher Biography," *John Beecher Papers*, Reel 1.

²⁶ Merl Reed writes that after the transfer of power, "[e]ven a simple field decision to charge an employer with discrimination could not be made without WMC approval. Since WMC regional, state, and area directors were usually political appointees close to local power structures, FEPC field activity would be stifled" (81). Also see Beecher's "8802 Blues," which provides an informative account of the FEPC's transfer to the WMC and the administrative and budget problems that ensued for the Committee.

²⁷ Letter to Beecher's parents, September 8, 1942. *John Beecher Papers*, Reel 5

business leaders, and unions would come together to discuss how to redistribute their combined labor resources. McNutt, sitting behind a desk, pontificates: “One of my first steps as chairman of the War Manpower Commission was to appoint a policy committee of representatives of labor and management to help locate and solve our manpower problems.”²⁸ McNutt’s plan to meet the demands for war labor involved increasing the amount of education and training facilities, recruiting skilled workers from “non-war enterprises,” and gearing nonessential, non-war industries into war production.

McNutt’s film also addressed the integration of black workers into defense industries as part of the plan to increase the quantity of war labor. The narrator states that “unemployed or employed below their best capacity are a million Negroes” who can be hired immediately to do moderate to skilled labor.²⁹ To demonstrate this point, McNutt shows a black worker, who is sweeping a factory floor, being offered a choice of higher paying and greater skilled jobs. The worker chooses to be a welder, and subsequently goes through a quick and efficient training class, which provides him the opportunity to work at a variety of jobs. He eventually gets a welding job in a racially integrated factory, working under a white foreman. The voiceover confidently supports the possibility for promotion: “in government schools all over the country such workers train for jobs of vital importance. Day and night classes are conducted.”³⁰ Thus the WMC — and by proxy, the FEPC — promotes a vision of a rapidly expanding war industry in which the old lines of racial segregation are rendered obsolete. Ultimately, as McNutt

²⁸ Paul V. McNutt, *Manpower*. The film, in its entirety, can be found online at the Internet Archive. See <http://www.archive.org/details/Manpower1943>

²⁹ McNutt, *Manpower*.

³⁰ McNutt, *Manpower*.

states at the film's conclusion, the total integration of all possible workers and industries into the war effort, will eventually ensure that "all work is war work."

However, Beecher's FEPC fieldwork in the south deeply contradicted McNutt's vision of the war industry and policy towards black workers. In numerous interviews, meetings, and investigations Beecher had revealed a policy of discrimination that operated within management and government concerning war industries. By the time McNutt's film had been released, Beecher was clearly frustrated by the obstacles preventing him from doing his job. Consequently, in addition to his office work at the NY FEPC, Beecher started presenting papers and speeches outside of events sponsored by the government in an effort to publicize his investigations. In particular, at the Institute on Problems of the War conference at the Astor Hotel, and the New Year's Day 1943 NAACP convention in Bridgeport, CT, Beecher spoke with his authority as an FEPC administrator and was recognized by his audiences as such.³¹ For these occasions, the WMC did not endorse Beecher and tried to prevent him from reading at these events. In a letter, Beecher relates the difficulties he encountered with the War Manpower Commission in trying to give the speeches:

[War] Manpower Commission is trying to shut my mouth — I had an awful time getting "clearance" on the Bridgeport speech in advance, and I was flatly refused clearance on the one I made at the Astor — I made it anyhow — It's squarely up

³¹ The conference for the Institute on Problems of the War was held on November 28, 1942 at the Astor Hotel in New York City. The NAACP convention held on January 1, 1943 in Bridgeport, CT, commemorated the eightieth anniversary of the "Emancipation Proclamation." At both events, Beecher was invited to speak about his work with the FEPC, war mobilization, and discrimination within war industries.

to them to do something about it — If they try to fire me for it, there will be a real hullabaloo.³²

Beecher gave these talks in defiance of the government, publicly countering the view of the WMC and FEPC seen in *Manpower*. At the Problems of War conference at the Astor, Beecher spoke about racial discrimination within a larger panel concerned with general problems of manpower mobilization.³³ In particular, Beecher revealed the sham state of black training facilities in the south, something not touched upon in McNutt's film. Beecher said:

Hardly any defense training was open to Negroes anywhere in the South, and much of what was labeled defense training was close to being outright fraudulent. I might mention one course for 150 shipfitter helpers where the sole shop equipment consisted of some shipyard pictures clipped from *Life* magazine and a bathtub navy purchased out of the instructor's pocket at the five-and-ten. This particular course accounted for two-thirds of the Negro trainees in the state of Georgia ("Problems" 39).

In his talk at the Astor, Beecher argued that discrimination was an impediment to the war effort, and called on government and industry leaders to mobilize all potential labor sources. He criticized the federal and local oversight of defense industries, and warned "that if the President's order outlawing [discrimination] can be utterly disregarded in one part of the country, it can be in any part." Beecher also advocated action at the grassroots. In addition to his investigative work, and recommendations made to the

³² Letter to Beecher parents from John Beecher, November 29, 1942. *John Beecher Papers*

³³ Beecher spoke on a panel titled "Problems of Discrimination." All the talks from Institute on Problems of the War conference were published in *Science & Society*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (Winter 1943).

government, Beecher told the excluded black workers to “get behind whatever movement was at work in their community trying to start a real war job training program for Negroes. I told them if there wasn’t any such movement to start one themselves” (“Problems” 43). Beecher established critical distance between himself and the WMC bureaucracy by challenging the vision of mobilization presented in the official documentary produced by the Office of War Information.

Whereas at the Astor conference his investigations took the form of a paper, at Bridgeport, Beecher’s speech for the NAACP event took the form of a poem, titled “After Eighty Years.” Beecher originally conceived “After Eighty Years” as a speech to be delivered at the 1943 Emancipation Proclamation Celebration in Bridgeport: the event marked the eightieth anniversary of Lincoln’s famous executive orders. The Bridgeport NAACP sponsored the event and similar to the Astor conference Beecher was invited as an administrator for the FEPC. Beecher’s correspondence leading up to the Bridgeport event shows that he conceived of his address as a speech. Dorothy Norman agreed to print what Beecher called the “Bridgeport speech” in the 1943 *Twice a Year*.³⁴ Yet when Beecher’s Bridgeport speech was printed in the 1943 edition of *Twice a Year*, it had been formatted as a poem titled “After Eighty Years.” Beecher did not convert a pre-existing speech into a poem for publication. Rather, the editors of *Twice a Year* indicate that Beecher wrote “After Eighty Years” as a poem, which he read as a speech to the NAACP event.³⁵ Beecher corroborates this account in his war memoir *All Brave Sailors*. He writes:

³⁴ Letter to Beecher’s parents from John Beecher, November 29, 1942. *John Beecher Papers*, Reel 5.

It was New Year's Day and I had to make a speech in Bridgeport, Connecticut . . . The occasion was not only New Year's Day but the 80th anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. I had been asked to speak because I was the regional director of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice for New York and New England. This was an agency set up by President Roosevelt to carry out his order that all Americans — regardless of race, creed, color or national origin — should have a fair chance to work at their highest level of skill in war industries . . . What I had to say that night took the form of a poem when I wrote it out beforehand (*All Brave Sailors* 57-58).

Beecher does not give a reason as to why the Bridgeport address was written as a poem instead of a speech, like the one he had given a month beforehand at the Astor Hotel. However, "After Eighty Years" marks a significant shift in Beecher's New Deal documentary poetics. In "Two Talks to the American People," Beecher used his experiences in Florida with the FSA and other records to document the social and political problems facing the United States in 1940. The documentary poem addressed the actions of the government and the New Deal, but Beecher did not write the poem in his capacity as an administrator. Yet in "After Eighty Years," Beecher does in fact write and present his poem as a regional administrator for the FEPC. Although McNutt and the WMC generally disapproved of Beecher's attendance at the Bridgeport convention, the poem is still essentially a government report detailing the work of the Committee. The position of authority and witness that was instrumental in "Two Talks to the American People," is therefore amplified in "After Eighty Years" by being anchored within the

³⁵ The footnote reads: "*After Eighty Years* was delivered as an address at the Emancipation Proclamation Celebration sponsored by the Bridgeport, Conn. branch of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People, January 1, 1943.

context of a government official giving a public address. Moreover, the context for the poem as a speaking engagement further emphasizes the orality of Beecher's documentary poetics. Beecher designed "After Eighty Years" to be heard rather than read, a detail which shows that he viewed poetry as an effective means of communication. He used "After Eighty Years" to inform his Bridgeport audience and subsequent readers how the New Deal investigative work in the South tried to advance racial integration — and how its obstruction threatened that promise.

"After Eighty Years" incorporates Beecher's work both as FSA supervisor in the Florida migrant camps in 1940 and as a FEPC field representative in the South in 1942. The poem itself is split into four parts. Parts I and IV discuss the promise of racial integration through the Emancipation Proclamation and how that promise fell short in the eighty years since Lincoln's orders. Part II relates his work in Florida, focusing upon the ability of the black migrant workers to form their own local government. Part III recounts Beecher's FEPC work in Georgia, Texas, and the greater South, documenting the exclusion of blacks from war-industries such as munitions plants, and aircraft and shipbuilding factories. The poem is essentially a documentary of Beecher's New Deal work on problems of racial equality and integration, and how that work forges a historical relationship to the Emancipation Proclamation.

In Part I, Beecher argues for the importance of the Emancipation Proclamation in the North's victory over the South. The freedmen coming over to the North after 1863 expanded the Union army, and Beecher shows how their contributions turned the tide of the war:

Emancipation

brought the Negroes in on the North's side
 and turned the scale
 Lincoln said so then
 but after eighty years our school history books
 still have nothing to say
 about the 200,000 Negro soldiers and sailors
 who lost a third of their number
 fighting for their freedom and the Union (122).

Beecher opens his poem as a corrective to standard histories of the Civil War, presenting the achievements of the black soldiers as integral to the Union's victory. He argues that the history of the black soldiers is not merely unknown but willfully forgotten. However, as Beecher mentions, Lincoln recognized the importance of the black war effort, speaking of its necessity at the time. Beecher attempts to recover what has been erased, and what was presumably known by Lincoln: that in towns such as Memphis, Port Hudson, Ship Island, Fort Wagner, and Nashville, blacks fought for the future of the Union and the United States.³⁶

However, the black contingent of the Union army isn't Beecher's sole focus in Part I. As important as the increased fighting force was to the North's war effort, Beecher argues that the black labor force supporting the Union army was equally important in the eventual defeat of the South. In "After Eighty Years," Beecher describes a war effort in the North that relied on the mobilization of all its inhabitants — black and

³⁶ These towns are specifically mentioned by Beecher in "After Eighty Years" as places in which black Union soldiers fought against Confederate forces.

white. The totality of the added black labor force driving the Union army added to its strength and eventual overpowering force:

Behind these black fighters
 were black workers for freedom
 in hundreds of thousands
 [. . .]
 builders teamsters cooks and nurses of the wounded
 while by the hundreds of thousands
 Negroes left their plows in the fields of slavery
 seeking refuge in the camps of blue armies
 seeking work in freed fields
 then having found it
 they plowed to feed and cloth blue armies
 while gray armies
 went bare and hungry
 After eighty years
 we ought to know these things
 better than we do (123).

The successful mobilization of blacks in Northern war industries offers a striking parallel to Beecher's own situation as a federal representative investigating racial discrimination within war industries in the South. Through his history of the Civil War, Beecher argues that a racially integrated war effort is superior to one that is segregated. And similar to Beecher's FEPC reports, Part I of "After Eighty Years" presents racially inclusive

mobilization as a literal and symbolic test of democracy. History is integral to Beecher's commemorative poetic documentary of war labor, grounding the factual material of the past and present into a larger social and moral narrative.

Part II of Beecher's poem sets the African-American struggle for political and civil rights in yet another historical context, drawing extensively from his work in the Florida migrant camps as an FSA supervisor and the testimony given to the Tolan Committee. In the report, as seen previously, Beecher describes his investigations of the camps and shows the government playing an active role in improving the lives of the migrant workers. Yet for the commemoration of the Emancipation Proclamation, Beecher chose to emphasize the experience of the black migrant communities in Florida and explicitly connect their self-governance with the workings of American democracy. By doing so, Beecher gave a new context to his documentary materials, showing how the relief work of the New Deal not only attempts to address the poverty of the Depression, but also is fundamentally involved in the promise of racial integration and equality mandated by the Emancipation Proclamation. In the poem spoken to the audience, Beecher establishes his authority of witness, declaratively stating: "Let me tell you what happened / I know / because I was there / and I was in charge of the camp" (127). Similar to "Two Talks to the American People," Beecher employs an overt testimonial voice to build his documentary poem. Through his rhetorical use of direct speech, he attempts to convince his audience of listeners and readers that all of the information related in the poem can be taken as the truth of the matter. Beecher's documentary poetic relies heavily on his ethos as an observer and participant in the Florida migrant camps. Additionally, he draws from his testimony to the Tolan Committee to buttress his claims

regarding his position of authority. Concerning the black migrant workers, Beecher writes:

We just got them altogether in the community center
 and told them it was their camp
 and they could make it a bad camp
 or they could make it a good camp
 that it was up to them
 and there wouldn't be any laws or ordinances
 except the one they made for themselves
 through their elected council.

Then for a week
 they had a campaign in camp
 with people running for office the first time in their lives
 and after the campaign
 people voted for the people they wanted to represent them
 for the first time in their lives

[. . .]

All I know is
 my eyes have seen
 democracy work (127-28).

Comparing Beecher's report to the Tolan Committee with his poem delivered to Bridgeport audience reveals the continuities between the government testimony and documentary poem. Both stress the potential of the migrants to self-organize and create a

system of government that is beneficial to the community. Both discuss the representational nature of their councils and the necessity of elections. And ultimately, Beecher stresses the local government within the black migrant work camps as an example of democracy at work.

Yet despite the New Deal's promise of democratic equality, Beecher demonstrates to his Bridgeport audience how that goal has been obstructed in the South. In Part III, Beecher uses his firsthand experiences to describe the poor training facilities for blacks in Georgia. The material is similar to the paper that Beecher gave to the Institute for the Problems of War conference a month earlier. Beecher has a domineering presence in the account, narrating from an eyewitness perspective:

I was down in Georgia
looking over this government training program
and I saw fine new shops
full of the most up-to-date machinery
millions of dollars worth
and I saw where thousands of white people
men and women
were being taught at the expense of the government
how to weld ships and rivet airplanes and the rest
but I didn't see any Negroes in the shops
though Negroes are more than one out of every three
of Georgia's people (129).

Beecher's poetic arrangement of the conditions in Georgia gives the comparison between the white and black training programs a sharper distinction than within the prose account delivered at the Astor hotel. The training facilities are filled with "thousands of white people" of both sexes, using the latest machinery to aid in their education. Guaranteed job placement on ship and aircraft assembly lines is promised through the training. Beecher clearly states that the government subsidizes the job training for whites, ensuring their success. The great mass of white workers in the programs is contrasted to the equally large mass of black workers who are excluded — over one-third of the population of Georgia.

Beecher continues Part III by striking a comparison between the white facilities and the black training schools that he investigated. The eyewitness mode once again dominates his documentary account and highlights his authority as an FEPC field representative:

I had to go a long way in Georgia
to find any Negroes getting training
and when I found them
this is what I saw. . .
bare classrooms with benches and blackboards
not a lathe nor a drill press nor a welding machine in the place
men trying to learn through their eyes
what could only be learned through their hands.

In all of Georgia

not one Negro woman
 was getting even this kind of training
 and when I asked why not
 authorities said to me surprised
 “If Negro women could get war jobs
 what would people do for cooks?” (129-30)

Beecher effectively shows how the black workers are denied the most basic, necessary equipment for their training. Their classroom experience has zero-value in terms of practicality. Job placement is also near zero for black trainees in Georgia since they are learning “through their eyes” what should be learned through direct experience, as in the white training programs. Beecher’s presentation of black “eyes” compared to white “hands” in the job training presents a grim scenario. Instead of being participants, the blacks are reduced to being spectators in the war effort. They are sidelined and left to watch war production from the impoverished and bare classrooms. Additionally, although white men and women have equal opportunities at the training facilities, Beecher shows how black women are completely excluded even from the poor training facilities for black men.³⁷ The government authorities that Beecher questions have already designated a role for black women, regarding them as domestic servants.

Beecher ends “After Eighty Years” in a similar way to “Two Talks to the American People.” He directly asks his Bridgeport audience why the United States is fighting against the Axis powers and how the ideals of American democracy can be squared with the exclusion of African-Americans from war production industries:

³⁷ In *Manpower*, McNutt shows that white women have equal opportunities, and earn the same wages as men do in war industries. Women are shown to work all kinds of jobs, from inspection to welding ship parts. The film does not make any comment on black women working defense labor jobs.

I know there's a war on
 but what is this war about anyway
 how can we believe
 how can the world's people believe
 we mean to spread the light of freedom to the world's four corners
 when there is such darkness
 in America's own house?" (131).

Beecher's final question encapsulates his determination and social activism on the behalf of correcting racial injustice throughout the war years. For Beecher, the war against the Axis powers was an opportunity to extend racial equality and civil rights to oppressed groups within America in the service of defeating fascism and totalitarianism. The United States and the Allied forces eventually won the global fight against the Axis, but the domestic battle for racial justice ultimately remained protracted at the conclusion of the war.

Beecher himself did not remain through the end of the war working for the New Deal. Soon after he delivered "After Eighty Years," Beecher left the FEPC, frustrated by the lack of implementation of FDR's executive order and deeply disappointed over continued segregation in war industries.³⁸ He eventually signed up to work aboard the S.S. Booker T. Washington for the duration of the war: the first racially integrated Merchant Marine ship under the direction of the black captain. Beecher later wrote about his time on the ship in his memoir *All Brave Sailors* (1945). Although his New Deal documentary poems have largely been forgotten, one hopes that the recent work being

³⁸ The exact date of Beecher's departure from the FEPC is unclear. However, a letter from Alfred L. Bernheim to Beecher, dated January 21, 1943, states that Bernheim "was very sorry to learn that [Beecher] had resigned as the New York regional representative of the FEPC."

done on Beecher revives interest in his currently neglected poetry and biography. Beecher's "Two Talks to the American People" and "After Eighty Years" deserve greater recognition for their outspoken and unrelenting focus on civil rights and racial justice during World War II and their distinctive approach to documentary. Beecher approached his documentary art from the perspective of the projected testimonial voice. His documentary poetry is primarily an oral art, having built its data through firsthand experiences, fieldwork, and records, but also through a constructed ethos of veracity and witness. To accept Beecher's New Deal poems as documentary, therefore, requires a belief in both the information on the page and the strong declamatory voice that carries that information. In this sense, Beecher is unique among American documentary poets.

Epilogue: American Documentary Poetry after 1945

As we have seen, the writers of documentary poetry between the Depression and World War 2 had divergent political convictions and arranged their material in strikingly different ways. Joseph Kalar used his documentary poetic sketches as a means to record worker life and develop an American proletarian art in Mike Gold's *New Masses*. Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky approached documentary form through the lens of material history, organizing excerpts from political tracts, letters, memoirs, and economic writings into competing poetic archives that aimed to refocus economic discourse and advocate new ways of viewing the American nation. Muriel Rukeyser incorporated testimonial evidence in the form of interviews, government hearings, and congressional records to document the mining disaster at Gauley Bridge, WV and the criminal negligence of Union Carbide. Her project shifted from "The Book of the Dead," her poem influenced by the Popular Front and conventions of 1930s documentary film, to "Gauley Bridge," a film sketch that exhibited a shift towards the American migrant worker, narrative and enacted scenes. And John Beecher employed a strong direct speaking style and testimonial ethos as a New Deal administrator to reveal the problems of racial discrimination in American defense industries and throughout the country.

The carnage and horrors of World War 2 and the radical transformation of the geopolitical landscape following the conflict changed the perception and use of political ideology within American documentary poetics. The Old Left, which had faced a severe blow after the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939, had almost entirely dissipated after the end of the war. The combination of a deepening conservatism paired with HUAC and McCarthyite witch-hunt politics drove the already discredited American Communist movement

entirely underground. Furthermore, as the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union increased, and overt political rhetoric was used to support a string of military interventions, American documentary poets employed a deep suspicion towards political and cultural ideology within their works. Charles Bernstein argues that poetry written after World War 2 exhibits a “greater attention to the ideological function of language: taking the word/world-materializing techniques of radical modernism and applying them to show how ‘everyday’ language practices manipulate and dominate; that is, the investigation of the social dimension of language as reality-producing through the use of radical modernist procedures” (“Second War” para. 13). Postwar American poets, similar to but perhaps more aggravated than their modernist predecessors, composed their documentary poems with attention to the ideological function of the language they employed. The textual materials and eyewitness testimony that they incorporate into their works are used not only in the service of depicting a scene, but are also simultaneously scrutinized for the ways in which they betray their production. Thus, postwar American poets document both the processes of the language they use as well as the subjects they are attempting to record.

For example, in “Wichita Vortex Sutra” (1966), Allen Ginsberg examines the American media’s use of sound bites to describe the Vietnam War and the inevitable downplaying of the war’s violence and brutality as a result. In an extended passage, which incorporates headlines from newspapers published in the mid-west, he writes:

Put it this way in headlines

Omaha World Herald – *Rusk Says Toughness*

Essential For Peace

Put it this way

Lincoln Nebraska morning Star—

Vietnam War Brings Prosperity

Put it *this* way

Declared McNamara speaking language

Asserted Maxwell Taylor

General, Consultant to White House

Viet Cong losses leveling up three five zero zero per month

Front page testimony February '66

Here in Nebraska same as Kansas same known in Saigon

in Peking, in Moscow, same known

by the youth of Liverpool three five zero zero

the latest quotation in the human meat market— (407).¹

For Ginsberg, language is another weapon in the arsenal of war that allows information about the conflict and casualties to be manipulated in order to sell its acceptance at home. His critique is directed toward the language production of mass culture at war and its ability to manufacture a statistic and rapidly disseminate it from headline to headline across the globe. Ginsberg powerfully exclaims: “The war is language, / language abused / for Advertisement, / language used / like magic for power on the planet: / Black magic language, / formulas for reality” (409).

Ginsberg’s critique of language as the source for “formulas for reality” not only reveals his acute discomfort with the ways in which language molds to ideology, but also

¹ All references and page numbers given for “Wichita Vortex Sutra” are from the *Collected Poems: 1947-1997*.

shows a complex relationship to the very medium of his art. His investigation of language and texts can also be seen in Denise Levertov's war poetry. In her volume *To Stay Alive* (1971), which records the impact of the Vietnam War on American politics and the anti-war movement, Levertov records how government and media pronouncements on the war hide the graphic brutality of the conflict and impede the communicative functions of language. In describing a newscast, she writes:

“It became necessary
to destroy the town to save it,”
a United States major said today.
He was talking about the decision
by allied commanders to bomb and shell the town
regardless of civilian casualties,
to rout the Vietcong.’

O language, mother of thought
are you rejecting us as we reject you?
[...]

you are eroded as war erodes us (21-22).

Levertov's treatment of her excerpts, similar to Ginsberg's, renders them as evidence that shows both the conflict's indiscriminate violence and the destruction of language under the influence of war. As a result, both Ginsberg and Levertov's poetic personas within their documentary poems are not as clearly demarcated as Joseph Kalar's or John Beecher's. In Kalar and Beecher's documentaries, the rhetorical force of their aesthetic

approaches designated the poet as the prime seer of events – the one who travels across the country and catalogues information about its inhabitants and their experiences.

Ginsberg and Levertov, however, must struggle in their approach toward the Vietnam War and their documentary subjects. Both poets evoke strong skepticism for the language that they incorporate into their poems and argue that the act of documenting Vietnam involves a careful scrutinizing of the poet's position in the media-sphere surrounding the war.

The rigorous questioning of language and its ideological production also prompted American documentary poets writing after World War 2 to move in an entirely different direction from Ginsberg and Levertov. Instead of drawing attention to the political and social contexts surrounding their sources, poets such as Charles Reznikoff have presented the documentary record itself as a poem. For example, the entirety of Reznikoff's *Holocaust* derives from the multi-volume *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals* and the court records of Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem.² Unlike Pound, Zukofsky, or Rukeyser, who used textual evidence primarily to support a political or economic argument, Reznikoff presents the trial transcripts as an eruption of truth, unadorned and unexplained. The violence of the documentary record in *Holocaust* is unrelenting primarily because of the lack of an overt framing device in the poem. This is not to say there is no process of selection on Reznikoff's part: the folders that contain the notes and excerpts for *Holocaust* in the Mandeville Special Collections at UCSD contain thousands of carefully chosen pages from the volumes of the tribunal and trial records. Reznikoff performed a significant amount of reduction and compression toward his material. However, his editorial hand is entirely absent from the presentation

² See Reznikoff's note at the beginning of the poem.

of the work, suggesting that Reznikoff wanted the abridged testimony to be stripped of any ideological framing and have the records become an act of revelation.

The documentary poems of Joseph Kalar, Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, Muriel Rukeyser, and John Beecher thus mark a distinct style belonging to the literary and historical period between the Depression and World War 2. As this thesis has tried to demonstrate, these poets attempted to situate their poetry within the material record of history and extended the documentary motive to include modernist poetics. My hope is that this critical work and its collection of poets and sources not only furthers the conversation on twentieth century documentary arts, but also brings a new understanding to American modernist poetry production.

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EDUCATION

Ph.D. in English, The Pennsylvania State University	anticipated May 2011
M.A. in English, The Pennsylvania State University	May 2006
B.A. in English, University of Illinois at Chicago	May 2003

PUBLICATIONS

"From Verse to Screen: Muriel Rukeyser's Documentary Film Adaptations of the 'The Book of the Dead' and the Rise and Fall of the Popular Front," Revise and Resubmit from the *Journal of Modern Literature*.

HONORS AND AWARDS

Milton B. Dolinger Graduate Fellowship in the World War II Era, The Pennsylvania State University, 2009-2010.

Institute for the Arts and Humanities Graduate Student Summer Resident, The Pennsylvania State University, Summer 2009.

Edwin Erle Sparks Fellowship for Graduate Study, The Pennsylvania State University, 2007-2008

Milton B. Dolinger Graduate Fellowship Research Award, The Pennsylvania State University, 2006

Department Travel Grant, The Pennsylvania State University, 2007, 2009, 2010

Ernest C. Van Keuren award for Outstanding Graduating Senior in English, The University of Illinois at Chicago, 2003

CONFERENCE PAPERS AND INVITED TALKS

"Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky's Documentary Histories of the United States in *Eleven New Cantos* and "A"-8. *Louisville Conference on Literature & Culture since 1900*. February 2010, Louisville, KY.

"The Nexus of Teaching and Research." Talk presented at the Penn State College of the Liberal Arts "Reunion Lunch" to celebrate the Liberal Arts Centennial. June 2009, University Park, PA.

"John Beecher's Documentary Poetics of the New Deal." *Louisville Conference on Literature & Culture since 1900*. February 2009, Louisville, KY.

"The Power of the Particular: Ideas of Social Resistance in Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* and Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*." *Popular Culture Association & American Culture Association National Conference*. April 2007, Boston, MA.