Form and Function in Muriel Rukeyser's *Savage Coast*

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
August 2021

Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki,
the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.
We are all Treaty people.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....iii

Acknowledgements.....iv

Chapter 1 Introduction.....1

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework.....5

- 2.1 Autobiografiction and Autofiction.....5
- 2.2 Women's Autobiography and Coming-of-Age Narratives.....11
- 2.3 *The Life of Poetry* and Documentary: Rukeyser's Philosophy.....15

Chapter 3 A Parallactic Coming-of-Age Narrative.....23

- 3.1 Documentary and Psychogeography: "None are presented at all photographically".....24
- 3.2 Self-Analysis and Relationality: "A fresh start".....30
- 3.3 Translation of Ideas: Language and Politics.....36

Chapter 4 Conclusion.....44

Works Cited.....47

Abstract

This thesis analyzes the relationship between various literary modes and narrative functions in Muriel Rukeyser's posthumously published novel *Savage Coast* (written 1937, published 2013). This thesis critically positions Rukeyser's novel within the development of women's autobiographical fiction from the Modernist period to contemporary practices. I use both historical and contemporary frameworks to examine the contexts within which the novel was written in (the 1930s) and how Rukeyser's literary experiments are still impressive and relevant today. I argue *Savage Coast* is a testament to Rukeyser's various interests in multiple modes – documentary, fiction, and poetry (among others). The different forms of the novel directly correlate to narrative function: each different mode of writing adds a new dimension to the protagonist's experience of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War.

Acknowledgements

I first met *Savage Coast* and Muriel Rukeyser through the class "Writing the Spanish Civil War," so I want to thank my classmates (all three of them!) for our discussion of the novel: that seminar formed the basis of my understanding. Thank you to my supervisor Dr. Bart Vautour and my second reader Dr. Heather Jessup for both of your kind support and generous feedback. Dr. Vautour told me when we first met and started talking about thesis ideas that I might like a book called *Savage Coast* – as it turns out he was right. Dr. Jessup made this strange pandemic grad school experience somewhat more normal by going out for coffee to chat about edits.

Thank you to my parents and siblings for frequently listening to and reading various parts of this thesis. Your love is what has given me the confidence to pursue my goals, even if they take me thousands of kilometres away from you.

Thank you to my new, dear friends from this cohort for always being a WhatsApp message away. Online and in-person, we kept each other (mostly) tethered to reality and helped each other navigate this unique experience.

I am grateful to be living, learning, and exploring in Kjipuktuk, Mi'kma'ki. Being able to escape my computer and go hiking has been crucial in this year of online courses and I am keenly aware of the privilege I have to travel on the traditional and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. I am committed to learning and extending my respect and support to the Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island, for the benefit of our future on the land.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Muriel Rukeyser[1] was a Jewish-American poet and journalist who was traveling to the People's Olympiad in Barcelona "from July 19-24" 1936 (Kennedy-Epstein "Introduction" ix). *Savage Coast* is the novel she wrote "immediately upon her return from Spain in the fall of 1936", although it was subsequently "rejected by her editor Pascal Covici of Covici-Friede in 1937" and was "misfiled in an unmarked and undated folder in the Library of Congress" until around 2011 when it was discovered and edited by Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, who then published it with Feminist Press in 2013 (Kennedy-Epstein "Introduction" ix-x). Based on biographic information and personal journals, we know the settings and historical events are very similar to Rukeyser's actual experiences in Spain, but she fictionalizes the events and her reactions to them through the character Helen: Helen is a twenty-two-year-old reporter on a train with other tourists and national teams going to the People's Olympiad, the beginning of the revolution and general strike halts their train in Moncada, and they stay for several days before traveling by truck to Barcelona, and subsequently being evacuated to France. The story follows Helen through this formative experience: her political, sexual, and emotional coming-of-age. The story is populated with a host of other Spanish and non-Spanish citizens from the train who react to the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. The narrative is based on Rukeyser's experiences and interactions, but she takes poetic license transforming the events into a novel

Given its composition during a time rife with modernist experimentation in form and aesthetics, the blend of representational modes in *Savage Coast* is in many ways a product of its literary milieu. Having gone unpublished during the modernist period, though, Rukeyser's text now stands apart from its context—its temporal, political, and cultural site of production. There is distance between the critical and political conversations of the 1930s and of the 2020s which allows an expansive analysis of the novel's various narrative techniques because there is a lineage of modernist literature and autobiographical fiction to accompany *Savage Coast*. The novel can be placed back into its historical moment, but Rukeyser's experimental text can also be analyzed through a twenty-first century and retrospective gaze. My thesis will illustrate the ways in which *Savage Coast* uses hybrid representational modes, a modernist melding of fiction and non-fiction, and meetings of intertexts to create a multi-dimensional story about the protagonist Helen's development and shifting understanding of the world through the beginnings of the Spanish Civil War. My thesis will engage in two modes of analysis: one examining Rukeyser's authorial choices (her experimentation), and one analyzing how these affect Helen and the novel as a whole (the narrative). First, I will build a theoretical framework by defining concepts such as autobiografiction, autofiction, and women's autobiographical fiction. Then I will examine Rukeyser's own theories about writing and documentary to contextualize how self-analysis forms the basis of *Savage Coast*. In the second section, I will analyze the novelistic representation of Helen's coming-of-age in three dimensions: geographical documentary, philosophy of self-analysis, and interpersonal communication. In *Savage Coast* Muriel Rukeyser uses hybrid representational modes so that content of the story and the structure of the story complement one another; together the forms create a multi-dimensional narrative to represent the individual coming-of-age experience of a young woman and a collective experience of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War.

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[1] Throughout this paper, "Rukeyser" will refer to Muriel Rukeyser; "R. Rukeyser" will refer to Rebecca Rukeyser: Muriel's granddaughter who is an author in her own right.

Savage Coast cannot easily be contained under the genre of autobiographical fiction because the text is also concerned with documentary and poetic form, but autobiographical genre theory is a useful starting point. First theorized at the beginning of the twentieth century, autobiografiction appears to be the first term used to describe texts which combine fiction and autobiography. Autofiction, a post-modern term, also falls under the umbrella of autobiographical fiction. Autobiografiction is relevant to examine alongside *Savage Coast* because it expresses contemporary ideas about genre theory, and autofiction is relevant because it shows how the practice has evolved. Contextualizing women's autobiographical writing practices shows how autobiographical fiction, as a form, has historically been gendered. Analysis of Rukeyser's documentary and poetic work is also necessary for a comprehensive understanding of how she uses various genres to communicate the multiple dimensions of Helen's development over the course of the story: Rukeyser's writing shows a career-long interest in exploring the various literary and visual forms that can communicate subjective experiences. Helen's coming-of-age experience in the novel plays out in various ways that mirror the generic elements Rukeyser employs. Her experience as a tourist-turned-political-activist plays out partly in documentary form; her sexual liberation occurs as a result of her poetic relationship with German athlete Hans; and through all these experiences there is a common thread of self-analysis which is generally prevalent in autobiographical fiction. The novel is centered on Helen's coming-of-age, but it is not restricted to a traditional binary of either an individualist and masculine or a relational and feminine path. *Savage Coast* takes on both these dimensions of subjectivity, and multiple genres, to create a parallax, with Helen as the focal point.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Autobiografiction and Autofiction

The basis for *Savage Coast* is Rukeyser's intense memory of her experiences in Spain, which profoundly impacted her life; through Helen, Rukeyser fictionalizes the experience but retains the core emotionality. Autobiografiction, as coined in Stephen Reynolds' 1906 article of the same title, is the expression of a spiritual experience: "any emotion, beautiful thing, work of art, sorrow, religion, or love, which intensifies a man's existence; anything in short that directly touches his soul. Then autobiografiction is a record of real spiritual experiences strung on a credible but more or less fictitious autobiographical narrative" (Reynolds 28). Reynolds' definition of autobiografiction relies on books written by men (he cites a great number of novels in his essay), but aptly defines the "real" thing (or autobiographical truth) in the narrative as being the "spiritual experiences." Rukeyser's real spiritual experience was being in Spain at the outbreak of the civil war – evidenced by the writing she continued to do about the Spanish Civil War throughout her life (Kennedy-Epstein "Introduction" viii-ix). The concentration on spiritual experience and the event that significantly touches the author and/or protagonist's soul is a common part of autobiographical memory and writing. Throughout this chapter, I will examine the psychology of autobiographical practices, and specifically how the mode pertains to female writers, but first I will contextualize the evolution of this pertinent literary theory.

Autobiografiction is relevant for *Savage Coast* because the concept combines modes of writing, not just genre conventions. Max Saunders, preeminent scholar of autobiografiction writes, "[w]hat seemed a distinct form or genre (spiritual experience presented through fictionalised autobiography) then appears as a hybrid mode of writing (the intersection of autobiography, fiction, and essay) that can feature in any form – not just autobiography, but fiction, essays, biography, naturalist writing, reportage, letters, and so on" (Saunders 1050). Saunders' interpretation of Reynolds' definition emphasizes how flexible the genre and mode of autobiografiction can be. One of the most captivating and unique aspects of *Savage Coast* is how it jumps into different forms: autobiographical fiction narrative, documentary in the form of epigraphs and inserts, and poetry. Through the forms of fictional autobiography and documentary, and through the protagonist Helen, Rukeyser explores how the real experience could affect a young, politically conscious Jewish woman. Under the umbrella of autobiografiction, the distinct forms of documentary, autobiography, and subjective narration all accomplish the task of representing the real spiritual experience in a fictionalized mode.

Even so, Reynolds was not a prominent literary figure and his essay on autobiografiction was never widely received. So, what is its relevance in an analysis of *Savage Coast*? As Saunders explains, "[t]he sheer number of works engaging in it during this period, and the sheer variety of their forms, demonstrate that Reynolds was right to identify a renaissance of autobiografiction as a turn-of-the-century phenomenon" (1051). Throughout his essay, Reynolds lists many texts from the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century as examples of autobiografiction. The texts existed without a defined genre, but their popularity necessitated the theory which Reynolds proposed. Saunders continues that autobiografiction "announces Modernism" (Saunders 1054), especially the wealth of autobiographical novels that would come to be written by Woolf, Stein, and others. Traditional conceptions of genre and representation would be taken apart by Modernists, and Reynolds' definition of autobiografiction precedes that.

In current literary studies, the term autofiction comes from French literature, specifically as defined by Serge Doubrovsky in a 1977 novel, *Fils*. Autofiction was in fact "coined by the British-American novelist and critic Paul West" in a 1972 book review (Bloom 4),[2] but Doubrovsky's use of the term is more frequently cited. Doubrovsky describes, "[f]iction, of strictly real events and facts; *autofiction* if you like" (translated by Gronemann 241, emphasis in original). The genre calls into question "the boundary … between novels and autobiographies, between fictionality and factuality" (Gronemann 241). In other words, the process of writing about lived experiences fictionalizes them. In the understanding of autofiction, real events and persons can never be represented "truthfully." It is generally accepted in autofiction that language is symbolic and subjective; meaning will be created one way by the author who translates the experience into words and understood differently by each person who reads the text. So, even if the author is examining parts of their own life experiences in the novel, mediated by fiction, the reader has their own life experiences which will inform how they understand the narrative. Myra Bloom efficiently summarizes autofiction's shift from French literature to English, and its shift within English literature from being a male-centered genre to a female-centered genre. She argues that even though autofiction was first defined and canonically practiced by male writers, feminist scholarship in the 1980s shed new light on how female writers have used autobiographical practices:[3] "Far from lamenting masculinity's decline, autofiction's contemporary practitioners—the majority of whom are women—turn to the mode precisely to diagnose and denounce the constraints faced by female creators in a patriarchal society" (Bloom 7). Autofiction and other autobiographical practices have been impactful in expanding second-wave feminism's motto "the personal is political" and for illustrating the effects of intersectional oppression. Through autobiographical fiction, women can effectively explore their own life circumstances and do somewhat detached analysis of the self and events. Bloom continues:

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[2] "[A] *New York Times* review of Richard Elman's *Fredi & Shirl & The Kids*: West dubbed the book a 'hybrid autofiction about coming of age in Jewish Brooklyn'" (Bloom 4).

> One of the main critical insights that has arisen from their [writers who are women, queer, and/or people of colour] work is that the received view of autobiography—a genre pioneered by Saint Augustine and refined by Rousseau, de Quincey, and their inheritors—is inapplicable to many practitioners of life writing. The template provided by these men—the linear, retrospective narration of a unique individual—does not apply to many "ex-centric" writers …, who cannot or choose not to produce a coherent, teleological narrative. (11)

Contemporary autobiographical fiction is intersectional in subject matter and hybrid in form because it is being used by "ex-centric" people – these writers change the hegemonic genre of their oppressors into a tool to explore their complex identities or life circumstances.

Throughout the history of autobiographical fiction, regardless of who is writing and how, there has been a maintained focus on the psychoanalytical. One example is found in Shirley Jordan's 2013 essay "Autofiction in the Feminine," which is

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[3] Bloom suggests that retroactive grouping of autofictional texts could go "as far back as Walt Whitman (1819-1892)" (7) but does not note that Black women in America were writing autofictional slave narratives in the 19th century. Clearly, there are still scholarly gaps to be filled in our lineage of anglophone autofiction. See Kazeem, Maryam. "The Black Women Who Wrote America's Earliest Autofiction." *Literary Hub*, 25 Feb. 2019, lithub.com/the-black-women-who-wrote-americas-earliest-autofiction/.

foundational in establishing contemporary French "women's relationship to autobiography" (77). She notes that many of the French female authors she studies use autofiction to narrate traumas; Doubrovskyan autofiction typically uses similar "psychoanalytic processes" (Jordan 79). Ultimately, autobiografiction and autofiction tend to be used to analyze the self and experiences, in a safe way because the (often traumatic) experience is mediated through fiction. *Savage Coast* draws on psychoanalysis to narrate Helen's coming-of-age – she frequently reflects on her place in the conflict, what kind of person she would like to be, and tries to understand the deeper meaning of the events she experiences.

Moreover, Jordan connects autofictional practices to phototexts, which makes her critical work further relevant in evaluating Rukeyser's text. Rukeyser, as Catherine Gander discusses at length in her book *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection*, wrote a variety of phototexts, which according to Jordan's argument shows Rukeyser's sustained interest in experimenting with multimedia autobiographical fictions. Phototexts fall under the documentary form and, even though there are no photos included in *Savage Coast*, Rukeyser uses a similar visual documentary writing style to express scenes of civil-war Spain. Rukeyser thought that for a phototext to be most meaningful "[t]he poetry must … not rely on the photographs for message or movement, but, through a meeting of textual forms and styles, collaborate with the images to create a new, communicative art form" (qtd. in Gander 31). The two forms were meant to complement one another and ultimately create a brand-new meaning that could not be understood exclusively through poetry, nor documentary photography. I see a connection between the hybridity of phototexts and autobiographical fiction: both combine two different modes (photo and text, or autobiography and fiction) to create a new third mode which can accomplish distinct meaning-making. For example, on the train, Helen spends most of the ride between the France/Spain border and Moncada sitting with Toni the Hungarian athlete and several generations of a Spanish family:

> The train was stopping now every few minutes, at roads or at arbitrary points, where nothing but a near house broke the fields. They kept their heads out the window, Helen on one side, the young boy at the other, half in his grandmother's lap.
>
> They were reaching a station platform, talking about Madrid, the Scottsboro case, New York skyscrapers, the Berlin Olympics, the tawny cliffs of the coast just beyond their vision, the slow trains traditional to Spain. Their talk slowed as the train slowed. The train stopped. (Rukeyser 27)

Despite these characters having established their different nationalities and reasons for being on the train, they impact the international and political themes of the novel. The first paragraph makes a "photo": the centre of the image is the environment outside the train, then the gaze widens to show the heads of the passengers and how they are seated in relation to one another. The second paragraph is the "text" because it tells the story of these passengers on the train. The combination of a visual scene and a descriptive scene creates a hybrid documentary-style narrative; Rukeyser writes in the hybrid documentary mode throughout *Savage Coast*, first describing the visuals of the scene and then its characters in order to establish political themes and create subjective meaning.

2.2 Women's Autobiography and Coming-of-Age Narratives

In a psychological context, the thesis of *Savage Coast* is that Helen's internal life has changed course due to her outside circumstances being changed. In studies of autobiography (literature) and autobiographical memory (psychology), "turning points" prove to be significant and memorable, which means subjects remember and express them often more so than other memories. Turning points "may be defined as specific events that are perceived to change the direction of one's life" (Enz and Talarico 188). Further, turning points must be a "discontinuity," or, in other words, an event that is out-of-the-ordinary or non-normative in the subject's life (Enz and Talarico 188). In autobiographical literature, turning points are often the focus because they create a distinct change or development in the subject's life. Enz and Talarico write that memories of college (as one example) are recalled as "highly vivid" in subject's lives. Turning points are "event-specific knowledge that helps to unify one's life themes" (Enz and Talarico 189). In their study, they characterize transitions as "temporal landmarks," so turning points are events likely to occur during a time of transition (Enz and Talarico 190). They specify that transitions are "a distinct shift in your outside circumstances" whereas turning points might affect the outside circumstances but often "the event has impacted the course of your life as you look back on the event now" (Enz and Talarico 191). So, in autobiographical memory framework, Helen's trip to Europe is a transition, and her experience in the beginning of the Spanish Civil War is the turning point. Helen introduces herself to the reader by way of a long introspective scene while she rides the train into Spain. She thinks:

> It was all new and must be important, must be valuable, in the same way that she was used to thinking she must grow to be valuable. It was too much to carry, all this self-consciousness, and it was beginning to relax from her in the heat and adventure here. … She was bitterly conscious of her failure, at a couple of years over twenty, to build up a coordinated life for herself. This trip to Europe was to be a fresh start, in the same way that college had given her a fresh start. And now, nearing the end, with her work done and this week to spend at a People's demonstration, as she chose, the tension was breaking a bit. (Rukeyser 12)

Naïveté about the significance of coming of age is typical with turning point events; an individual can recognize they are significant at the time they occur, but they cannot fully understand how the turning point impacted their life until looking at the event in retrospect. Helen recognizes college was a transition point in her life, as is her trip to Europe, but she does not know quite what the turning point will be or mean to her yet.

Savage Coast is categorized as an autobiographical novel because the narrative follows the coming-of-age of Helen which closely follows the author's own lived experiences. As mentioned, the canonical origins of autobiografiction and autofiction are dominated by men, although the scholarly conversation has grown more inclusive in the past forty years. Contemporary scholarship analyzes women's writing with the understanding that feminist writing consistently inserts itself into men's practices to resist universalization of male experiences. Rukeyser's use of documentary and autobiographical fiction is new for the 1930s and subverts the masculinely conceived conventions of each genre, such as realism and individuality, by appropriating and mixing genres dominated by men's writing. Kennedy-Epstein writes, "Rukeyser's experimental and hybrid texts about the Spanish resistance document a multivalent reality that resists totalization" ("Whose Fires" 385). Rukeyser's novel is a portion of her experience of reality, and snapshots of other literary and historical representations of the Spanish Civil War. By refusing a singular form of representation, Rukeyser resists confining expectations of gender and genre. Her experiment is empowering because it affirms her place in the history of literature and the Spanish Civil War, but her experimentation with form also made the book unpalatable for male editors and reviewers, which is why it was not published.[4]

One way Rukeyser differentiates Helen's coming of age experience from the hegemonic male autobiographical narrative is by combining typically masculine and feminine tropes of developing subjectivity. Reviewing a swath of sociologists and psychologists, Christy Rishoi describes how coming-of-age studies have often prioritized male experiences. This translates into the *Bildungsroman* which has traditionally focussed on "a male paradigm of rugged individualism wherein the hero is nearly always self-reliant" (Rishoi 59). In contrast, women are often conceived as creating themselves in relation to others. Obviously, differentiating coming of age and creation of subjectivity based on sex is essentializing, but it is nonetheless the convention:

> Broadly … speaking, the process of growing up for a boy in the West means increased independence from others and a heightened sense of his separate individuality. For a girl, the process means initiation into the world of women, by which I mean that becoming a woman signifies the attainment of a mature understanding of her relatedness to other beings, especially other women.

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[4] For a full account of the reviews of *Savage Coast* (from the manuscript reception in the 1930s), see Rowena Kennedy-Epstein's "'Her Symbol Was Civil War': Recovering Muriel Rukeyser's Lost Spanish Civil War Novel."

> Manhood is associated with self-sufficiency, while womanhood is associated with continuing interdependence. (Rishoi 65)

Helen's coming-of-age is certainly brought about through her connections to others, but that does not necessarily mean she is not self-sufficient. Helen is influenced mainly through her relationship with Hans, her friendship with Peter and Olive, and her meetings with various others. Helen's developing subjectivity is narrated using tropes of autobiography, but in a form which does not abide by a feminine/masculine, relational/independent binary. Rishoi writes that many women's coming-of-age narratives insist "that romance *and* quest are entirely compatible, and thus valorize *both* the self-in-relation and individual quest" (9, italics in original). Helen's relationship with Hans is part of her self-development, but that does not diminish her individual subjectivity. The individual and the self-in-relation are not binary opposites, as the tradition of the masculine bildungsroman would have us believe. Rukeyser shows that Helen can develop her subjectivity alone through her independent travel experiences *and* she can develop further in a meaningful sexual relationship with a man.

In *Savage Coast*, Rukeyser boldly places Helen's coming-of-age narrative (the private realm) alongside the major historic moment of the Spanish Civil War (the public realm). Rishoi writes that some male scholars and writers criticize women's autobiography "for valorizing the private realm at the expense of … the much more valuable public realm" (17). Rukeyser refutes a clean, binary separation of the public and private and their gendered connotations: she rejects the bildungsroman as being a solely masculine, realist genre by writing autobiographical fiction that is psychoanalytical but also abstract and referential. The impressionistic style of Helen's narration makes the novel seem fragmentary, but "it is precisely this identification with the fragmented sense of self common in women's coming-of-age narratives that have made them so powerful in shifting dominant ideologies of womanhood" (Rishoi 83). Several 1937 reader reviews of *Savage Coast* harshly criticize the "scattered" and "confused" manner in which the narrative is conveyed (Kennedy-Epstein "Her Symbol" 419); these reviewers were doubtlessly men who expected a realist and disciplined prose typical of the bildungsroman, but Rukeyser, whose identities were marginalized, could never build Helen a purely individualist subjectivity in her patriarchal and heterosexist world. Contemporary writers of autofiction have the same impulse – to take apart hegemonic standards and create hybridized forms capable of representing diverse realities. Rukeyser identifies and embodies Helen's necessarily fragmented self through constructing the multi-genre narrative in *Savage Coast*.

2.3 *The Life of Poetry* and Documentary: Rukeyser's Philosophy

Even though *Savage Coast* is not strictly a work of poetry, Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*[5] outlines her philosophy on writing around the same time she was composing the novel. A biographical reading of *The Life of Poetry* by Eric Keenaghan shows how Rukeyser's writing practice was influenced by psychoanalysis and the desire "to rectify that 'lack' [of emotional language in analytical work] by reflecting how poetry provides a medium for experientially undertaking dynamic and therapeutic, rather than detached and scientific, analyses of the world" (Keenaghan 1104). Rukeyser, in the thirties and forties, was a believer in what second-wave feminists would come to practice years later—that the personal is political and that rigorous analysis of the world can be done in an emotional way.

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[5] Due to COVID restrictions and book availability I have not been able to get a copy of and do my own reading of *The Life* in time for the submission deadline of this thesis.

Rukeyser saw scientific and art as each being modes of communication, and the latter as being underused and underappreciated in the mid-twentieth century. In an article based on archival drafts of Rukeyser and the photographer Berenice Abbott's interdisciplinary photobook *So Easy to See,* Kennedy-Epstein writes "[Rukeyser] spent the postwar years advocating for the 'use' of poetry – and the artistic imagination more broadly – as an untapped resource she considered just as valuable as scientific knowledge" ("So Easy" 89). Rukeyser's writing in *So Easy to See* describes how an artistic perspective *as well as* a scientific perspective allows people to see the reality of the world's complexities – in effect, the phototext is a perfect vehicle for combining science and art, as well as the visual and the descriptive to create greater, more in-depth meaning. There is a continued need in so much of Rukeyser's work to capture as many different angles as possible of the subject – be it war, nature, or human invention – to fully communicate its significance. She believed that poetry and science could both be "language[s] of discovery" for modern Americans (qtd. in Kennedy-Epstein "So Easy" 89). Most succinctly, Kennedy-Epstein argues: "Both Abbott and Rukeyser wanted to make a claim on the sciences as women and artists during a time when the field was not only dominated by men, but when the notion of specialisation was used to separate fields of study from each other, defining who had the right to participate in intellectual inquiry" (Kennedy-Epstein "So Easy" 89). Rukeyser therefore was committed to interdisciplinary and multimedia projects throughout her life in the hopes of creating more progressive and inclusive public and academic environments. Kennedy-Epstein suggests that the loss of

Rukeyser and Abbott's final version of *So Easy to See* is an unfortunate "result of deeply ingrained sexism, of the failure to see women as inventors and discoverers, philosophers and geniuses, and it should provide another warning, among many, about how much is lost, is wasted, by our failure 'to see things as they really are'" ("So Easy" 102); she makes a similar conclusion about *Savage Coast* going unpublished in the twentieth century. Rukeyser's collaborative phototext project shows the significance she gave to interdisciplinary and multimedia meaning-making and knowledge.

What Rukeyser's poetry, documentary, and autobiographical fiction share is the belief that meaningful analysis of the world can be done through an artistic, expressive medium. If each reader brings their unique individual life experiences to the same piece of literature, they will all interpret it in slightly different ways. It is clear in *The Life of Poetry* that Rukeyser respected subjective interpretation and "expected her readers' relationships to her work, a phenomenological trace of her own experience while re-visioning her circumstances, to help them process their own emotional lives" (Keenaghan "The Life" 1106). So, for Rukeyser, the writing process was an act of psychoanalysis to help her understand her own life and experiences, but she also hoped that the act of reading would provide similar space for the reader to self-identify and self-analyze. Keenaghan continues:

> This therapeutic process is as much social, even political, as it is personal and ethical, since all experiences, including those readers have with and through a poem, are mediated by the conditions of a shared world to which they are responding, in the hopes of transforming it. ("The Life" 1106)

In other words, it is by individual self-analysis through the medium of a common piece of literature that we collectively come to understand and create our society. However, it also suggests that the experience of reading will be most meaningful if the readers are in the same world (temporally and spatially) as the author at the time they respond to the text – so *Savage Coast* could have had more impact on readers had it been read when everyone was experiencing the wars. Even so, the political conflicts at play in *Savage Coast* are still present in the twenty-first century (namely the fight against right-wing extremists), and we still have the ability to retrospectively understand how the world has developed from then to now.

Rukeyser believed poetry was a valid and important way to enact real social change, but she believed equally in the power of documentary – and that the two mediums were not so far removed. Gander's book *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection* argues "for a distinct and direct correlation between Rukeyser's writing and the modes, techniques and ideologies of the documentary movement as it flourished in the 1930s" (2). Gander gives a thorough history of documentary in the United States and shows that it was often used by Leftists to expose national and global social inequality and politics. Significant documentaries covered strikes, marches, and court cases in the nineteen-thirties, as well as conflicts like the Spanish Civil War (Gander 6). Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry* speaks to the power of documentarians in "creative and truthful communication to all aspects of human living" (Gander *Muriel* 7). Rukeyser also participated in creating documentary film throughout her lifetime and worked as a reporter as well (Gander *Muriel* 8). Gander notes that "Rukeyser's utilisation of filmic editing and imaging methods in her poetry stemmed from her appreciation of the structure of film as a rhythmic succession of still, photographic images" (*Muriel* 10). Rukeyser's philosophy of visual writing will translate into how she describes the geography of Spain and the scenes of civil war in *Savage Coast*. Overall, American documentary photography and film in the thirties, at least that which Rukeyser was interested or involved in, were focussed on encouraging "introspection and self-reflection" as well as "self-examination and autobiography" (Gander *Muriel* 37). These introspective examinations comment on social and political issues, but through the point of view of a unique subject. Documentary can never be completely objective – even if it is realist – because the director always has a reason for wanting to create the collection or film. Rukeyser understands authorial subjectivity and does not see it as a weakness in the ethical spreading of information; instead, as with Rukeyser's narration of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War through Helen's narration in *Savage Coast*, the protagonist's subjectivity strongly demonstrates an emotional point of view, grounded in documented history, that others can then interpret in light of their own experiences. Subjective art has its strength in the ability to demonstrate an emotional point of view that others can then interpret in light of their own experiences.

The analysis of subjectivity and relationality is one of the keys in Rukeyser's work. One of the critical theoretical points in Gander's book is the connection between Martin Buber and Rukeyser. An article written by Rukeyser's granddaughter, Rebecca Rukeyser, discusses Gander's recognition of this theoretical connection and adds a personal anecdote: "I mention this to my father [Rukeyser's son, Bill]. 'As I recall,' he said, 'Grandma talked about Buber a lot with her Jungian analyst.'" These biographic details further confirm Rukeyser's lifelong dedication to introspection and self-analysis.

Rukeyser and Buber were both Jewish, and Buber's theory of *Ich und Du* / *I and Thou* (1923, trans. 1937) "situates man in dialogic relations with man and with God" (Gander *Muriel* 40). Buber's theory is based in "traditional Judaism" and posits that "man" realizes "true understanding of himself and his own purpose" in relation to others and to God (Corwin 68). In other words, psychoanalysis is most significant when one includes their relationships with others, rather than just analyzing their internal selves. *The Life of Poetry* examines many of the same ideas Buber's theory does: "Rukeyser speaks of 'defining actions in terms of a relationship, so that the individual is seen not only as an individual, but as a person moving toward other persons, or a person moving away from other persons, or a person moving against other persons.'" (Wolosky 220). Helen's active experiences in Spain are almost always occurring as she moves towards or away from other people, and her political and emotional developments are significantly impacted by these interpersonal interactions. In Helen's first meeting with Olive and Peter, she asks if they had been riding in third class as she was; in response, Peter advises Helen: "Don't be class conscious when it's irrelevant" (Rukeyser 46). Earlier, Helen had made the choice to sit in third class (rather than first class, with Peapack) because she "was liking the Spaniards" (Rukeyser 14). As an American journalist, Helen has had experiences mixing with other classes and seems to consider it more authentic or entertaining to sit with locals than with other tourists. She reaches out to Peter and Olive to connect as a fellow socially conscious individual, but Peter reminds her that in the general strike, everyone on the train is left in the same situation of helplessness – they have effectively been levelled. Helen develops more nuanced political ideologies as her interactions with others cause her to reflect on her own and others' positions.

Not only is Helen relating to people who have different political ideas than her, she is also interacting with a great variety of citizens from different countries. Shira Wolosky notes that it is specifically Rukeyser's Jewishness that informs her "place within this multi-ethnic pluralist milieu" (221). Helen, like Rukeyser, grew up in New York, and was presumably similarly surrounded by multi-ethnic communities – Wolosky argues these experiences are what helped Rukeyser form her theories about self-analysis:

> That is, to be a Jew … is to acknowledge in the self—one's own and others'—multiple participations and associations, with an emphasis now on one, now on another, to be fluid in relationships that form among identities in different ways at different times, sometimes in harmony and sometimes and with tensions and conflicts between them. (Wolosky 221)

To be aware of and fluid in one's relationships is to be in touch with the historical and cultural context one is engaged in. Rukeyser's various texts on the Spanish Civil War, centred on relationality, are always intimately aware of the precise context of the conflict and the world. Wolosky's argument aligns with Buber's: modern Jewish philosophy acknowledges and stresses the fluidity of relationships and the broader social context, and how interpersonal and broad social relationships form an individual's personhood. means that Rukeyser's interest in Buber supports her rejection of New Criticism which "idealized a poetry chiseled and iconic in form, a self-enclosed object of language referring to itself regardless of historical context, biographical reference or cultural frame. Rukeyser instead saw her writing as a form of direct cultural, political and social activism" (Wolosky 202). As such, the epigraphs she chooses help to create the cultural context into which *Savage Coast* occurs. The epigraphs and the body of the novel cannot simply reference themselves; readers need the context of where the epigraphs come from and broad political context to understand the very immediate and concrete setting of the novel.

Take for example the epigraph to chapter two: "*Junction or terminus—here we alight. –C. Day Lewis*" (Rukeyser 15). The epigraph is the first line from section 26 from the collection *The Magnetic Mountain* (1933) by Cecil Day-Lewis. All of Rukeyser's epigraphs are related to the subject matter or ideology of *Savage Coast*: Day-Lewis was a leftist who used poetry as a vehicle for politics and social justice. *The Magnetic Mountain* is described as "a left-wing, allegorical poem" (O'Donoghue and Gelpi 3), which broadly relates to Rukeyser own ideology and theme for *Savage Coast*, but the quote taken also literally describes the action of chapter two. The train has stopped due to the general strike and the passengers do not know whether it is temporary or permanent, junction or terminus. The epigraph foreshadows that the passengers will be moving on with their journeys from Moncada, whether or not they had planned to stop there. *Savage Coast* is an intertextual novel and its relation to its contemporary literary and political moment is very purposeful in its mission to be a piece of political activism. Day-Lewis' epigraph sets the cultural context (namely the train, a symbol of travel in the modern era), reaffirms Rukeyser and *Savage Coast*'s leftist ideology, and advances the action – three distinct narrative uses.

Chapter 3 A Parallactic Coming-of-Age Narrative

A parallax is defined as a "[d]ifference or change in the apparent position or direction of an object as seen from two different points" (OED). For the purpose of literary criticism, a parallax usually refers to the technique of using two or more points of view in narration to show the different dimensions of the same object or event. Even though *Savage Coast* maintains one close third-person point of view, Helen's, I argue the novel still uses parallax by way of its multiple genres. Rukeyser uses documentary, verse, and prose to show various dimensions of the Spanish Civil War as witnessed by Spanish and non-Spanish citizens. In *Savage Coast* the object of the parallax is always the fight against Fascism, but as Helen moves to different points, she sees the conflict moving and changing as well. Helen physically travels to various places in Spain where she literally sees different sides of the conflict, but also as she experiences different people's points of view her own perception shifts and she sees the conflict in new places.

The documentary aspect of *Savage Coast* is most clearly demonstrated in the epigraphs to each chapter, which contextualize the novel's contemporary literary and political scenes. Rukeyser's opening epigraph reads:

> This tale of foreigners depends least of all on character. None of the persons are imaginary, but none are presented at all photographically; for any scenes or words in the least part identifiable, innumerable liberties and distortions may be traced.

Rukeyser's disclaimer is what makes certain that the reader will read *Savage Coast* as a work of fiction, and not an autobiography. From the outset, Rukeyser captures the notion that experiences written down are inherently subjective and that fact and fiction are inextricably intertwined. She unsettles photographic representation with poetic license in

Helen's subjective impressions and distorts historical facts with fictional narrative. Rukeyser is telling the truth how she wants to, on her own terms. The epigraph also calls back to her previous work with phototexts and documentary film; Rukeyser has the ability to represent events in "photographic" ways, but here she pointedly refuses that form. She is taking creative control over her experimental project, even if the narrative is based in fact.

3.1 Documentary and Psychogeography: "None are presented at all photographically"

Helen's experience in Spain is literally grounded in her perception of the geography of Spain. The very first moments in the narrative are descriptions of the countryside Helen sees as she rides the train from the south of France into Spain. The train, then, is what first propels the narrative and provides the first actions. The opening of the novel is visual and impressionistic:

> The train went flashing down France toward Spain, a stroke of glass and fine metal in the night.
>
> Its force of speed held the power of a water-race, and dark, excited, heavy before morning: it was traveling, lapping in the country, in speed.
>
> She got up, bending her head low, twisted the length of the sleeper, and pressed her face against the window. Now she could gather herself firmly in, twist in the sleeper, lie with her eyes washed over by the black countryside pouring past, streaming over her as she stared out.

> She looked out with an intent look of finality: she expected everything of the day, of the long roll of night-country. In a blaze of excitement, the world changed: to speed, sleep and speed. (Rukeyser 7-8)

From the outset of the novel, descriptions of the geography are personal and even project pathetic fallacy. The train is described as "lapping in the country" which also washes and streams over Helen – the opening scene establishes a motif of water being related to the passage of time. The speed and power of the train embodies Helen's excitement at being in a new country. Helen is excited to see cacti and cork trees, and her reactions to Spain's geography are genuine and filled with tourist curiosity: "Outside, the long fields began to take the attention, stripes of blond wheat, purple (thistles, flowers?), walls with long sheaves, long branches laid against them, glimpses of sea that had no color but the light it held, the hot white light, and the little fair brooks that ran blue under the tracks, the pools" (Rukeyser 20). The use of multiple clauses separated by commas in a single, long sentence is characteristic in *Savage Coast*. Helen's description of the Spanish countryside is constantly evolving as she takes in new sights from the moving train, which she lists in succession. She questions whether the purple in the field is from thistles or flowers, an observation that is represented in the text by using parentheses. Rukeyser connects Helen's psychological state to Helen's experience of Spain's geography early in the novel, which establishes the subjective point of view of the narrative.

Individual experiences of the city and the environment can shape subjectivity – Helen's opinions and selfhood are impacted by the unique and jarring experiences she has in Moncada and Barcelona. Since *Savage Coast* is, at least in part, a travel book, "psychogeography" is useful to examine Rukeyser's experimentation and purpose. Catharina Löffler explains:

> The term as such was coined by the 1950s Situationist International, a Parisian group of social activists whose aim was to counteract the shift from individual experience and individual expression to mass-consumerism. Their practices, including psychogeographical explorations of urban space, were intended to develop a new, non-collective awareness of the urban landscape that put the individual at the heart of urban experiences. Psychogeography thus builds on subjectivity, too, as it prioritises the emotional and psychological dimensions of urban experiences. (6)

Along the same vein as Rukeyser's argument for poetic and subjective analysis of the self and the world, psychogeography promotes the individual, emotional experience of urban spaces. The practice prioritizes subjective individual experiences over "mass-consumerism." Each individual experience the city differently, and these unique experiences build subjectivity more than a homogenized mass-consumption of the geography would (I think, for example, of *Savage Coast* compared to a mass-market magazine article or travel guidebook about the region of Catalonia). Rukeyser attempts to represent Helen's subjectivity through her unique, specific experience of Barcelona. *Savage Coast* does not set out, like a travel book might, to document the city in an easily communicable way: Rukeyser does not intend to allow for the reader to easily traverse the settings as Helen moves around Catalonia. Instead, the narrative creates a disorienting experience for the reader because Helen herself is disoriented as a tourist and outsider in a city at war. She does not get to experience monuments as a tourist would, instead she only gets fragmented scenes of the city, often overcome with barricades. Helen's is an unusual experience of the city, one that few ever viewed, and therefore it is meant to be subjective; Rukeyser uses documentary and poetic form to represent the – sometimes chaotic – various perspectives of Catalonia erupting into conflict.

Documentary and psychogeography come together in the sense that both have to do with how people experience and represent landscape or real events. The narrative of *Savage Coast* is intersected by paratextual documentary material in the form of epigraphs at the start of each chapter. Kennedy-Epstein provides annotations at the end of the book to explain most of these, and she also includes a fragmentary chapter from Rukeyser's manuscript among the annotations. In Rukeyser's archive, there are secondary materials such as letters, travel diaries, and drawings – some of which are contextually connected to Rukeyser's experiences in Spain. There are no such materials included in the physical copy of *Savage Coast* that has been published, but scholars have consulted the secondary materials when editing and compiling editions of the novel. For example, Eulàlia Busquets, while writing the Catalan translation of *Savage Coast*,[6] examined the geographic and social history of Moncada, one of two main settings for the story. She used Rukeyser's hand-drawn map of Moncada[7] and travel diaries as the basis for her research, along with pre-civil war photographs and "council documents" provided by local historians in Moncada (Busquets). These secondary materials helped Busquets to visualize and reconstruct nineteen-thirties Moncada. Busquets writes, "[t]here is no doubt that the novel has a real and precise setting and context and that it has a true documentary spirit." These pieces of historical record show that Rukeyser was actively documenting events and places in a factual, realist way, but they only serve as part of the basis for *Savage Coast*. Rukeyser uses documentary as the base of her narrative, but, as she states in the opening epigraph, she does not attempt to represent the events or settings of the Spanish Civil War "photographically." The map does not just provide historical context; it also illustrates Rukeyser's play with genre and representation. She had the capability to write a much briefer reportage-style text which was more in line with the conventions of the day and what her editor wanted (Kennedy-Epstein "Introduction" x), and what she does in the article "We Came for the Games" in the 1970s, but she chose to fictionalize her experience of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War and use various modes to express her impressions.

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[6] Busquets writes that she first came across Rukeyser's work in 2000, and sometime after *Savage Coast* was published in 2013 Busquets spent eighteen months translating the novel into Catalan. The Catalan edition was published in September 2019.

[7] An image of Rukeyser's hand-drawn map (along with other historical documents) can be viewed in Busquets article. The map is stored in the Library of Congress.

Rukeyser's map and diary entries of Moncada likely helped her to sort through the chaotic details of her experience in Spain, but in the novel Helen is in the thick of the chaos. Helen and the other characters are tourists in Barcelona, many of them having never seen the city before. Some of the Olympiad teams were in Barcelona before the general strike and rebellion began and "got to know the town pretty well before anything happened" (Rukeyser 196). The teams who arrived in Barcelona earlier have had a unique experience: to have seen a city go from the site of an exciting international event to a civil war zone. Helen only sees Barcelona as a war zone, dangerous streets broken up by barricades, and landmarks at risk of being destroyed. The guide at the Hotel Olimpiada takes Helen to the rooftop to show her the city by night. He maps the city verbally and it appears to Helen as he describes it:

> The circle before them had painted its shadow, elliptical and fantastic, on the ground, and there was no clue to this lunar landscape. A crescent of moon-colored ground filled out the shadow, but the pieces would not conform. She could not understand. The wide ring rose around its distortion of shadow and the pale segment, swinging around as her sight swam, turning grotesque cartwheel circles in the irrational lighting.
>
> "Bullring, he said; and it fell into its shape, built up in violent lighting and shadow. "And beyond," he said, pointing up the length of another Rambla, "the Plaza de Cataluña, scene of heroic battles, the largest in Spain." He turned her half about, until she faced the cliff and the range. "Did you see the fortress as you rode in?" he asked. She nodded. "Up there is the Tibaldo; you see where the lights run straight, in parallels. That's the new city, all modern buildings, supplementing the old city." (Rukeyser 173)

Without a mental map of the city, it looks like a "lunar landscape" to Helen – utterly unrecognizable and foreign. Through description from the guide, the city takes shape and she is able to "see" the landmarks. The experience of the city is translated to Helen through a more knowledgeable person. The theory of psychogeography relates to Helen's experience of Barcelona because a city can be experienced with every sense; in this case Helen's sense of sight is being supplemented with her sense of hearing. Helen hears the geography of the city through the hotel guide and that forms part of her subjective experience.

3.2 Self-Analysis and Relationality: "A fresh start"

Helen describes Spain both as her "birthday" (Rukeyser 184) as well as the place where she was "born again" (266) – she describes how she had a life before Spain, and then the whole experience in Spain was a life in itself (266). What she has been born into is a new consciousness: her short "lifetime" of experiences in Spain have helped her develop mentally and emotionally into a more prepared adult. At the end of the book, when Helen is boarding a refugee boat back to the south of France and her lover Hans is staying behind to fight in the International Brigade, Rukeyser succinctly writes: "Life within life, the watery circle, the secret progress of a complete being in five days, childhood, love, and choice" (Rukeyser 267). Helen's "secret progress of a complete being" describes her coming-of-age experience – the events of the past few days have moved Helen from adolescence into adulthood. Jung, although writing after Rukeyser had written *Savage Coast*, describes the early twenties of a person's life as the end of their "psychic puberty," at which point the individual has fully developed and integrated their consciousness: "This development establishes a firm connection between the ego and the previously unconscious psychic processes" (par. 102-03). There was no doubt an implicit understanding of coming of age as a development of the conscious mind before Jung formally theorized it as psychic puberty, as evidenced in a great number of autobiographical novels, including *Savage Coast*. In fact, Helen is spot-on for describing her experience in Spain as a fresh start; for, as Jung writes, "consciousness does not enter the world as a finished product, but is the end-result of small beginnings" (Jung par. 102). Helen's time in Spain is "a fresh start" (Rukeyser 12), a new beginning to her life, and new consciousness.

At the beginning of the novel, Helen is very self-conscious about her role and usefulness in the world. Even though Rukeyser, at twenty-two, was already "a successful poet" and "had already engaged in political activism" (Kennedy-Epstein "Her Symbol" 417), Helen appears to be less experienced. When she meets a few of the other Americans they ask if she is associated with an organization and she replies that she is not, but she has "been in the American Student Union, and … done some work for the I.L.D." (Rukeyser 45). The International Labor Defense (ILD) played a prominent role in the defense of the Scottsboro trial (which Rukeyser reported on) and so readers can assume Helen has done some work in America advocating for racial and class justice (Kennedy-Epstein "Her Symbol" 417). However, recalling how Helen "was bitterly conscious of her failure, at a couple of years over twenty, to build up a coordinated life for herself" (Rukeyser 12), it is clear she feels uneasy about how effective her political activism and career have been up to this point.

Throughout the novel, Helen comes of age through the integration of her ego and conscious mind; by the time she arrives in Barcelona with the other foreigners and witnesses the conflict and chaos in the city, she has grown surer of herself and of her political beliefs. The self-analysis and reflection that are characteristic of autofiction and autobiografiction are demonstrated when Helen thinks:

> She had wanted a life for herself, and found she was unequipped; and adjusting her want, cared to be a person equipped for that life. I want greatness, she thought, the rich faces of the living. All the tenseness stood in the way, and see how it removes! One morning and the fear of death is replaced.

> She would always have this street before her for a birthday; she was proud in herself for a moment: this is how I come of age! she thought. (Rukeyser 184-185)

Helen has come to realize what and whom she cares about in life and wants to be a person who can have an impact on the world. She is very aware of the gravity of the Spanish Civil War, but she is not afraid. It is significant that Helen, as a young woman, feels proud of herself in the male-dominated context of political revolution. Her coming-of-age is just as important as a man's, and the development of her mind is intimately detailed in *Savage Coast*.

These introspective opening and closing passages mark the significant differences between Helen's thinking at the beginning and end of the book. In both she mentions feeling the tension of the discrepancy between the life she is living and the life she wants. Helen is very self-aware, but she is also consumed by the weight of living so internally. In the opening scene of self-analysis, she expresses how she feels conflicted about her relationships and does not know how to create "a coordinated life," which causes her increased internal stress and tension. In the second passage, however, she calls back to the "tenseness" and notes that it has removed. Like in other places, Rukeyser purposefully uses the same language in order to call back and show development. The tension was caused by Helen's desire to create purpose in her life and find liberation from the past relationships and experiences she has had, which she has released by experiencing life-changing events and relationships in Spain.

One character who helps Helen develop the emotional side of her experience in Spain and helps her to build subjectivity is Hans. Immediately Helen admires the way Hans carries himself: "perfectly at ease in a controlled walk" (Rukeyser 105). Helen identifies Hans as a thoughtful individual, like herself, but one who is master of himself and of his relationships with others. Hans offers to help bring Helen's suitcase from the school back to the train and "[s]he walked with long safe strides beside him. He was not at all impeded by the load. … His walk was as balanced as before, he was master. The identification struck her. He was an athlete; a member of the Games!" (Rukeyser 114). Helen consistently notices how balanced and controlled and masterful he is in mind and body, which is in contrast to how she thinks regularly to the injured leg that frequently inhibits her movement.

Savage Coast creates a binary relationship between Helen and Hans in order to illustrate Helen's development as she comes of age. Kennedy-Epstein has written about the significance of the juxtaposition of Helen and Hans and their "Jewish/German love story" ("Introduction" xxv). Hans is in peak physical condition and is completely sure of himself, in contrast to Helen's weak leg and internal conflicts. As Kennedy-Epstein writes, Hans' masterful body "will be used to struggle against those forces of annihilation [i.e. Fascism]" ("Introduction" xxv). Even though Hans is the embodiment of the Berlin Olympic Games which are linked with Fascism, he undermines them by going to compete in the People's Olympics and fight in the International Brigade. Helen, as a disabled Jewish woman, is Hans' foil, and she develops (in part) as a result of witnessing him and having sex with him. Not only does Helen note how beautiful and athletic his body is, but she also gets the sense that "[h]e was in perfect dominance over himself, trained, disciplined active" (Rukeyser 121). The unification of body and mind is something that Helen strives for, even though she feels "her symbol was civil war … endless, ragged conflict which tore her open … If she knew so much about herself, she was obliged to know more, to make more …" (Rukeyser 12). Helen feels torn apart and damaged inside, and this is partially reflected onto her chronically injured leg. In her relationship with Hans, though, "Helen's damaged body is intimately and erotically restored through sex" (Kennedy-Epstein "Introduction" xxiv). Their physical union is one aspect that helps Helen to find balance and clarity through the integration of her ego and consciousness, thereby advancing her coming-of-age.

In *Savage Coast* Hans is not only associated with physical mastery, but with water, which is symbolic of an emotional refresh. Twice on the first night they meet Helen mentions how thirsty she is – once just before she lays eyes on him (Rukeyser 105) and then again at dinner with him (Rukeyser 108). It is highly suggestive that Helen's thirst is emphasized before she has sex with Hans, as though he will play a part in quenching it. In fact, in a fragment chapter that was not included in the final version of the manuscript, there is another scene of Helen drinking and she says, "Spain makes me thirsty" (Rukeyser 277, annotation to page 92).[8] Helen's thirst is an established pattern, and it appears that she is thirsting for self-growth because she mentions wanting to know more about herself and be more prepared for her own life in the two reprised scenes of introspection at the beginning and end of the novel. Hans, then, being the water that quenches her thirst, is an actor who helps Helen develop as an individual. At the end of the novel, Helen expresses to Hans how he has affected the course of her life:

> "I *am* changed," Helen told him. "I want you to know. You began anew – you set in motion – it is as though I had gone through a whole other life," she said

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[8] Kennedy-Epstein writes in the "Annotations to *Savage Coast*" that "chapter five remained unfinished, and is quite fragmentary" (275) although Rukeyser noted in the manuscript that she intended to fill it in. Ultimately, the scene I reference above was not included in Kennedy-Epstein's version of the novel because it "was never fully integrated into the chapter" (Kennedy-Epstein 276), but instead left as an annotation at the end of the book.

> lamely. But she felt the truth of the words before she spoke them and they became timid and broken.
>
> "Yes," he said. He was still suffering.
>
> "I was almost born again, free from fear. The ride in, or the morning at the Olympic." (Rukeyser 266, emphasis in original)

Although she cannot fully communicate the deep significance of their relationship to him, she acknowledges that it is he who had an impact on her coming of age.

Moreover, despite Helen and Hans being purposefully binary characters, their love affair at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War advances feminist autobiographical fiction because their climatic intimate confession coincides with the political speech from the organizer of the People's Olympiad. The public and private spheres are melded as the narrative goes back and forth between Helen and Hans' attempts to describe how they have impacted one another lives through love and the multi-lingual speeches at the political demonstration. Rukeyser weaves together the public/masculine and the private/feminine and in doing so asserts that politics and love can be explored alongside one another. The public and private do not need to be represented as mutually exclusive, heavily gendered spheres – the integration of the public and private allows Helen to develop emotional and political maturity.

Hans helps Helen develop an ease of communication in the same way he helps her to develop a more confident sense of self. Sitting in the garden with Hans shortly after meeting him, Helen struggles to hold a conversation in German, and he in English so "[t]hey changed to French; both were confined, but it would do" (Rukeyser 110). Communication is always mediated by language knowledge and switching to a language they both speak only partially fluently makes it so that they will understand each other a bit better, but still not completely. However, Helen and Hans' physical and emotional connection overcomes their verbal communication. After only knowing one another for a few hours, Helen and Hans are alone and Helen "was suddenly satisfied. It was enough that she understood what he said, could respond to the smallest inflection of his voice. With a roll of relief, she was freed from her need to speak, which had weighed on her since she crossed the frontier" (Rukeyser 112). Even though their verbal communication is not very strong, Helen's close observations of Hans and their immediate connection allows her to release her need perfectly communicate. At their parting, Helen has a moment where she says, "I wish I spoke German" (Rukeyser 265). Knowing they will soon be separated, Helen feels pressure to communicate fully with Hans, but she must be satisfied with the connection they have had. Their relationship must be understood for what it is, with its strengths and weaknesses. Hans has helped Helen to develop her confidence in body, mind, and communication.

3.3 Translation of Ideas: Language and Politics

Helen struggles throughout the story with not being able to speak Spanish or German – the languages of the country and of her lover, respectively. She frequently expresses her frustration and embarrassment with not being able to communicate; she feels "as if her tongue were cut out. No speech, no words to reach any of this" (Rukeyser 37). In this scene, Helen's feelings of helplessness come from not being able to speak Spanish with a shopkeeper, but also from the sight of a group of Anarchist boys with rifles heading to Barcelona. The experience of being a foreigner in Spain while it begins to be engulfed in civil war is something Helen cannot express in any language she knows.

She also struggles to express her political ideas, simply because she has not been "really active" before the events of the story (Rukeyser 45). Rukeyser's employment of multiple modes in *Savage Coast* amplifies Helen's distress at being an inefficient communicator across languages. Different modes communicate different ideas and perspectives, just as different languages use distinct words to communicate different nuances of ideas: Rukeyser's combination of fictional autobiography, documentary reportage, impressionism and poetry is the way in which she tries to communicate effectively. The different genres are the different languages of literature, and by writing a multi-genre book Rukeyser captures the international and multi-faceted nature of the People's Olympiad, the Spanish Civil War, and the Fascist conflicts both represent. The end of the book, which transcribes the speech given by the organizer of the People's Games, reads: "*It is your work now to go back, to tell your countries what you have seen in Spain*" (Martín quoted in Rukeyser 269). *Savage Coast* is an impassioned attempt to communicate the civil war to Americans, and Helen's distress over multi-lingual communication is Rukeyser's expression of needing to communicate the message of anti-fascism and international cooperation through multiple genres. Representing the Spanish Civil War through a variety of literary modes in one text creates a multi-dimensional and more nuanced narrative because the parallactic perspective provides details that a single-focus and generic novel could not integrate.

Throughout *Savage Coast*, Rukeyser integrates epigraphs and excerpts of secondary texts, sometimes in other languages. In Chapter Fifteen, Helen, Peter, Olive, and a couple other Americans come across a bulletin posted by the antifascist committee instating martial law. They translate it in the text for themselves and for the reader's sake.

The translation is transcribed onto the page, but also interrupted as Peter attempts to capture the nuance of the Spanish document:

> B) Persons who pass accompanied by any of those elements and who assure their moral responsibility.
>
> "Not quite that," interpolated Peter, who was translating slowly, "it says *'su solvencia moral.'* Moral solvency!—There's a tag we could use." He went on:
>
> C) Those who are justified in case of great necessity which obliges them to go out.
>
> (Rukeyser 233, font difference in original)

Peter's interjection as he translates the bulletin shows how translation and transcription are subjective practices. Peter's attempt to translate is imperfect and his attempt to find the right phrasing reminds the reader that the document is not being represented photographically. Interestingly, the act of translation also suggests a parallax: the committee document is being presented through Peter's words to Helen, then to the reader through Helen's narration. In this sense, the document has been translated multiple times and therefore shows multiple points of view as each person translating the text adds different meaning to it.

There are numerous instances where Helen is unable to clearly translate her experience and surroundings to the reader. There are multiple scenes of crowds – at the train station, at the hotel – where everyone is speaking in different languages, and Helen cannot understand any of it. Instead, she narrates the feeling of these chaotic situations, and makes communication into a visible and tangible thing. Helen describes these scenes as being "[t]he cataract madness of new languages," a "tangle of noise," and a "whirlpool of languages" (Rukeyser 13, 16, 171), which illustrates how disorienting and overwhelmed she feels being surrounded by non-English speakers. These descriptions all make communication a somatic experience: cataracts blur and double vision, a tangle connotates a physical bind, and a whirlpool disorients and consumes objects it meets. Helen uses multiple bodily senses to experience and describe her new and strange situations. She is as disoriented being surrounded by foreign languages as she is being in a foreign city, as shown in the scene where she sees Barcelona from the rooftop. The physical and subjective descriptions of Helen's overwhelming and monumental experiences of the Spanish Civil War communicate her intimate intellectual coming-of-age experience to the reader.

Certainly, all the points at which Helen feels disoriented with language and politics are critical to understanding her development and internal processes. Being on the train and then in the cities with many different national groups complicates communication in the story: not only can people not always communicate in the same languages, but they also often struggle to communicate different political ideas. When Helen and Peapack are first getting to know one another, the latter mentions they are practically "neighbors" since they live in New York and New Jersey: "'The river isn't very much, as far as barriers go,' agreed Helen" (Rukeyser 10). Even though, for many North Americans, divisions of state, province, or territory are used to differentiate groups, in the context of the world they are both Americans. In this sense, a river really isn't much of a barrier – Helen and Peapack speak the same language and come from similar cultural and political contexts, even if they have differing opinions. Peapack is not aware that there is a People's Olympiad being held in Barcelona; she has come to do a tour of Europe and meet up with "very interesting" (Rukeyser 11) people in different countries. She has tourist ideals: what to do with her five suitcases comes up frequently as the train group navigates across Catalonia. Further, Peapack does not understand why there are "games *against* games" because she just "like[s] the spirit of sportsmanship" (Rukeyser 11). Her dialogue with Helen betrays the fact that Peapack is not politically aware and does not want politics to affect her life and trip around Europe. Peapack's failure to accept that the Berlin Olympics and everyone attending them are actively or passively supporting Fascism creates a rift between her and Helen. The irony of the situation is augmented as the narrator shifts from their conversation to "[t]he newspapers [that] lay unfolded on the floor, carrying the headlines of Europe that spoke of war on every street" (Rukeyser 11). There is a cognitive dissonance between Peapack's awareness that wars are coming and a recognition of how her support of Fascist countries also supports their goals of war. Even though Helen is, at this point, engaged in "girlhood liberalism" (Kennedy-Epstein "Her Symbol" 416), she feels a barrier between herself and the apolitical Peapack.

What becomes a barrier between Helen and some of the other politically engaged characters is language.[9] Upon meeting other passengers on the train, Helen becomes increasingly aware of her difficulty communicating with people from different countries: "She could catch, in the rush of comments, the words for *Olympic, American, committee, week*. Everything else was lost. The barrier had sprung up immense in a moment; here were friends, and she could not reach them. She thumbed at the list of words" (Rukeyser 16). These are people who might have similar political opinions to hers, but she cannot find the words to communicate with them. According to these two scenes, happening closely in the story, there are many types of barriers and some are more easily bridged than others. Helen's relationship with politics is at first, as I have mentioned, immature and somewhat circumstantial. Her work with the American Student Union and the ILD she does not classify as "real" political activity. She often feels self-conscious or uncertain about expressing her political ideas because they are not as fully informed as some of the others on the train. As Helen engages with the other foreigners and experiences life in Moncada, she quickly learns about the politics of the general strike and civil war. By the time she arrives in Barcelona, she expresses to the hotel guide how the trip has affected her:

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[9] The nature of *Savage Coast* is transnational, so different languages play a large role in the novel. In several places, Rukeyser writes in languages other than English and does not translate, except when characters in the book translate it for their peers. When I come across phrases in foreign languages, I tend to use whatever knowledge I already have to try and interpret them, but I usually do not take the time to look up/translate what I do not know. With *Savage Coast* especially, I feel that this is the "right" way to read. There are certain places where I feel disoriented with the languages or ideas, but I think the narrative intends to be overwhelming in certain points. The disorientation reader feels builds a relationship between them and Helen – the reader is included in the fluid relationships of the text.

> "This is a first impression that must be very difficult to swallow," he said …
>
> "Impossible to swallow," she answered. "More brilliant than anything in the world. I've heard people talk theory a little. To see it suddenly sets it all in a drowning flash." …
>
> "If only I were not outside," she said, looking at him with her peculiar timidity after saying something she felt deeply.
>
> But this was a different life. There was nothing, no result of expression, to fear. He was talking.
>
> "Not so far outside, because you care so much," he said. "But you still talk like an outsider, if you say brilliant—we have had the waste and the blood and the fighting. We hang on; it will take time for us to see the brilliance, what there is." (Rukeyser 171)

Since Helen's introduction to this point in the narrative, she has already become more confident in speaking her mind. Even though there remains a tension because she is a foreigner trying to understand Spain's experience of civil war, her passion for the Popular Front anti-Fascist cause means that she has the ability to make a meaningful statement about the politics. She is "outside," as a foreigner, but she is still a subject being affected by the events in Spain and the guide affirms that she is in a position to speak about it, although she cannot escape her privilege of not experiencing "the waste and the blood and the fighting" that the Spanish people have already experienced leading up to the general strike. The conversation between the Spaniard and Helen is a highly intimate and emotional moment where Helen illustrates that there is a balance between her theoretical understanding of politics and the emotional experience – she needed both to build a meaningful opinion about what was happening in Spain.

The barrier between the foreigners and the Spanish citizens is substantial too, the extent of which is established when the passengers of the train decide "[i]t's manifesto time" (Rukeyser 64). The group – Helen, Olive, Peter, and a few others – collectively write a letter to the mayor of Moncada and have to navigate the boundaries of foreign aid during a general strike and growing civil conflict. They decide they cannot outright sympathize with the town because not everyone on the train does, and they cannot tell the town what to do with the money (i.e. to help with "the care of the wounded and mutilated in today's battle") (Rukeyser 65). Throughout the novel, Helen tries to rationalize her position as a foreigner, but the strain never feels wholly resolved. She thinks to herself about the irony and stress of the situation, each thought punctuated on a separate line: "Tourists in the time of war. No orders, no orders. What could they do?" (Rukeyser 240-

1). There is never a clear direction for the tourists and athletes to take because they are effectively stranded: Spain’s attention has turned away from the Olympiad to their civil war, and the outside international community is slow to respond. The foreigners in Spain have unofficial meetings in restaurants and hotels to discuss how they can travel out of the country, or how they can stay and support the fight. Ultimately, Helen receives her “orders,” as a foreigner, only at the very end of the novel: to go back and tell her country what she has seen in Spain.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

I take my title from the phrase “form follows function:” a principle of design which describes how form is created or adapted in response to a functional need. In *Savage Coast*, form and function are inextricably linked; the novel’s fragmented – and sometimes unfinished – impressions of Spain are conveyed through a variety of modes and reflect Helen’s own fragmented self. Alternatively, the saying “form over function” denotes that sometimes beautiful or interesting-looking things do not have a practical use. With *Savage Coast*, however, the form *is* the function – Rukeyser’s use of documentary and poetic writing in her novel accomplishes specific narrative goals. Following the “Annotations” in the physical copy of *Savage Coast*, Rukeyser’s “We Came For Games: A Memoir of the People’s Olympics, Barcelona, 1936” is, in effect, an abridged, documentary version of the novel. [10] The novel and the article are one another’s formal antitheses: *Savage Coast* is a fictional, impressionistic narrative which mixes autobiographical form with poetic form, and “We Came For Games” is factual and linear. Rukeyser fulfilled her desire to write about the Spanish Civil War through separate poems and her documentary article, but *Savage Coast* is the only of her texts about Spain which harnesses all these forms.

Twentieth century theories of autobiografiction and autofiction bookend the Modernist period: these kinds of autobiographical fiction rely on the internal world and self-analysis. These patterns reflect binary social gender roles associated with coming-of-age narratives – generally the masculine coming-of-age novel is individualist and the feminine is relational. However, Rukeyser’s *Savage Coast* denies binary views of autobiographical writing and instead Helen’s story is at once internal and relational, personal and political. Multi-dimensional and subjective representation is what Rukeyser strove for in her poetry and her documentary practices: this was the theory behind her writing. Trudi Witonsky astutely notes that Rukeyser negotiated her relationship with her literary ancestors and the canon with the attitude to take what was useful to her and leave the rest (345). Rukeyser thought the canon was partially useful, but also limiting. Rukeyser was inspired Emily Dickinson, Hart Crane, and H.D., for example, and she influenced the likes of Adrienne Rich and Alice Walker (Witonsky 346); none are exact canonical copies of one another. Rukeyser applies the same philosophy to *Savage Coast*: she takes the useful elements of documentary, self-analytical autobiography, and subjective narration to create a hybrid novel with a broader scope than any one form would have allowed. She was not, as other Modernists like Ezra Pound were, concerned with representing an idea in a few, specific words. Instead, she valued the symbolic nature of language and how narratives could affect readers differently based on their unique emotional experiences. Rukeyser believed that the subjective, emotional relationship with literature and other people was what could shape a better world.

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[10] Published in *Esquire* magazine, October 1974.

In *Savage Coast*, Rukeyser's theories are illustrated through Helen's coming-of-age narrative. Through the use of documentary, poetry, and prose, Rukeyser creates a parallactic view of Helen's internal and external journeys. The documentary element of the novel shows Helen's relationship to the geography of Spain and her unique experience viewing it as a tourist as it is consumed in civil war. The visual extent of this experience is impossible to capture in words, so Helen narrates referential and emotional snapshots of Spain's geography. Helen thinks of her trip to Europe as an external transition in her life, but it becomes an internal turning-point as well. At the beginning, Helen is a self-conscious young woman who yearns to do something valuable with her life. Hans is introduced as her foil in the novel, and his self-assured, composed, and athletic nature begins to impact Helen. She is sexually liberated through her relationship with him, but she also grows more confident in her emotional and political convictions. Her relationships with other tourists and athletes on the train helps Helen to become a more confident communicator. Even so, communication remains a barrier to Helen throughout the novel and Rukeyser suggests that communication through one language, one form of writing, or one dimension of life is often inadequate. Ultimately, Helen learns that to communicate the significant experience she has had at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War is the most meaningful activism she can do as a foreigner in a country at war. Muriel Rukeyser's *Savage Coast* unites form and function, scientific and artistic knowledge as a means to focus on telling a narrative about the Spanish Civil War, and Helen's subjective perspective is a vehicle to communicate the effects of the fight against fascism on a young Jewish woman and the international community as a whole.

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