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Muriel Rukeyser and the Security of the Imagination: Poetry and Propaganda in 1940s America

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There has been a great deal of political talk about security in this century. Growth is the security of organic life. The security of the imagination lies in calling, all our lives, for more liberty, more rebellion, more belief.¹

These lines, written by the poet and activist Muriel Rukeyser in 1949, re-cast the paranoid and repressive discourse of security prevalent in the United States throughout the 1940s. They are taken from Rukeyser's visionary book of essays *The Life of Poetry*, which has been described by Adrienne Rich as 'a study of the function of poetry in a time of crisis'.² That crisis is intimately related to security. In 1940s America, not only creative thought but democracy itself was doubly compromised by the rise of fascism abroad and securitization at home. What Rukeyser calls 'political talk about security' would certainly have included President Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms speech' of 1941, which opens with the diagnosis that 'at no previous time has American security been as seriously threatened from without as it is today'.³ The 'Four Freedoms speech' set out Roosevelt's vision for a 'healthy and strong' democracy which would provide 'security for those who need it', and defined the freedoms security protects as freedom of speech and expression, freedom to worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear.⁴ For Roosevelt, as for classical political theory, security acts as a guarantor of freedom.

Rukeyser construes a more complex relation between security and liberty, one which encompasses 'rebellion' or dissent, and understands that security might repress the very democratic freedoms it is assumed to protect. Political repression was written

¹ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, foreword by Jane Cooper (Ashfield, Mass.: Paris press, 1996), p. 30.

² Adrienne Rich, foreword to Muriel Rukeyser, *Selected Poems*, ed. Adrienne Rich (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2013), p. xxi.

³ Rukeyser makes frequent references to Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms' speech in memos and other archival documents dated 1942-3. See Box II:8 folder 12, Muriel Rukeyser Papers 1844-1986, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Subsequent citations to the Muriel Rukeyser Papers will supply box and folder numbers thus (II:8, 12).

⁴ President's message to Congress, 6 Jan 1941; and President's Address proclaiming an unlimited national emergency, 27 May 1941, II:8, 12.

into the legislature of several controversial internal security acts passed in the US in the late 1940s. These acts were particularly concerned with the circulation of subversive literature, which the state understood both as the substance and the evidence of an imminent threat to its security. Writers from W.E.B. du Bois to Ernest Hemingway to Bertolt Brecht and Rukeyser herself were placed under FBI surveillance and in some cases, stood trial. In 1940s America, despite the talk of freedom, the ‘security of the imagination’ was very much under threat.

Why is imagination, understood as ‘a function of belief and experience’, so central to Rukeyser’s reformulation of security?⁵ In *The Life of Poetry*, global conflict is cast as the product not of a failure of security per se, but of a failure of imagination:

the war that has been over the world is a war made in our imaginations; we saw it coming and said so; and our imaginations must be strong enough to make a peace. First, to create an idea of that peace, and then to bring it about.

Always we need the audacity to speak for more freedom, more imagination, more poetry with all its meanings. As we go deeper into conflict, we shall find ourselves more constrained, the repressive codes will turn to iron. More and more we shall need to be free in our beliefs, as we come to our forms. The question of form and technique rises here. In art we recognize that within this constraint is our discovery. Necessity is indeed the source of freedom. But many readers think of form in poetry as a framework. It is not that. The form and music of the fine poems are organic, they are not frames.⁶

For Rukeyser, ‘the security of the imagination’ can be found in poetry. Yet poetry, in

⁵ Catherine Gander, *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 106.

⁶ Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, p. 30.

her conception, is in decline due to a fearful political climate. In the opening poem from her 1939 collection *Turning Wind*, Rukeyser writes: ‘The fear of poetry is the / fear’.⁷ Ira Katznelson’s recent critical reappraisal of the gains and losses of the New Deal, *Fear Itself*, describes how the fearful climate of the late thirties ‘became a permanent condition... an inextricable part of American consciousness, helping to produce an obsession with national security, one that risked political repression’.⁸ Here, Katznelson gestures towards security’s double character, as a state that protects against but is also productive or even derivative of fear.⁹ Rukeyser’s essay ‘The Fear of Poetry’, which was first published in 1941 before being collected as part of *The Life of Poetry* eight years later, articulates the connection between fear poetic and fear political. The ‘fear of poetry’ is construed as a fear of intimacy, the other, of community, of vulnerability. These are all pathological positions that for Rukeyser constitute a democracy in peril: ‘the resistance to poetry is an active force in American life during these wars’.¹⁰ The ‘fear of poetry’ is key to Rukeyser’s conceptualization of the security of the imagination. Alongside her reformulations of security, Rukeyser reads the ‘fear of poetry’ as ‘an indication we are cut off from our reality’.¹¹ To counter such fear-induced severance between self and social world, Rukeyser turns to the communicative, imaginative potential of poetry. In the lines excerpted above, a crucial tension between ‘frame’ or fixedness, and the ‘organic’ or fluid, is sketched out. An emancipation of *form* underpins Rukeyser’s vision not only of experimental poetry, but of the political. It

⁷ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and others (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), p. 155. All references to the *Collected Poems* are to the 2005 edition, unless otherwise noted.

⁸ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright, 2013), p. 3; Katznelson identifies three distinct fears: fear of dictatorships, of global warfare, and of racial structures, particularly in the South of the US (pp. 13-16).

⁹ Carl Schmitt describes the political state as generated by and against surrounding insecurity: ‘when a fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity’ in *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 28, 33.

¹⁰ Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 30.

is a state in which the positive guarantees of security (identity, freedom from want and from violence) are imaginatively opened up to subjects that have stood historically outside security: the enemy, the other, the non-conformist and the unpatriotic.

As one of the ‘prominent women in America’ (according to a 1945 communication from a government agency) and simultaneously under FBI surveillance, as a patriot, a poet, a political activist, a propagandist and a single mother, Rukeyser stood both inside and outside American security.¹² In official, artistic and activist capacities, Rukeyser came into close contact with the implications of the evolving landscape of US security through the 1940s. Consequently, both her poetic and her propagandist work supplies ways of thinking beyond dominant ontological assumptions structuring the discourse of security. Critics have judged the period between the 1940s-50s to be one of ‘literary decline’ for modernist poetry in general and for Rukeyser in particular.¹³ Against this diagnosis of ‘decline’ I argue, with Ben Hickman, that ‘political crisis’ (in this case, American entry into the Second World War) ‘can sharpen our sense of the historical force of poetry’.¹⁴ With a focus on two pivotal events of 1943 – Rukeyser’s resignation from the Office of War Information, and the so-called ‘Rukeyser Imbrolio’ – I seek to demonstrate how Rukeyser’s modernist poetics challenge the prevalent discourse of security. Through my examination of the intersections between literary material, critical interventions in security studies and previously unstudied archival documents, I will show not only how Rukeyser mediates and re-configures the workings of national security, but how her poetic and propagandist work points towards a pragmatic political alternative.

¹² II:18, 9.

¹³ David Bergman, ‘Ajanta and the Rukeyser Imbrolio’, *American Literary History* 22.3 (2010), 553-583 <www.jstor.org/stable/40800579> [accessed 14 August 2019].

¹⁴ Ben Hickman, *Crisis and the US Avant-Garde: Poetry and Real Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 2.

Writing at the margins

The recent resurgence of interest in the poetry of Muriel Rukeyser has been produced to a great degree by her reputation as a highly political poet. Her poetry cannot be read apart from her life-long commitment to political causes. Although most often described as a proletarian, Marxist poet of the 1930s, Rukeyser did not align herself with a single political position throughout her life.¹⁵ As well as a poet Rukeyser was a dedicated activist, devoting herself to causes ranging from the Spanish Civil War to workers' rights, the Vietnam war protest movement and, as President of International PEN, politically oppressed writers. Due to her involvement with the literary left, her sympathy for socialist and radical causes and proximity to communist groups, Rukeyser was placed under FBI surveillance for over forty years. Yet, as Jeanne Perreault reminds us, Rukeyser was 'an idealistic American, too given to humanist values to be considered anything but bourgeois by doctrinaire Marxists'.¹⁶ In 1943, an article in the then-Communist publication *Partisan Review* titled 'The Grandeur and Misery of a Poster-Girl' lambasted Rukeyser for her allegedly 'precipitous shift' from 'New Masses proletarianism to neo-Americanism'.¹⁷ Raphael Allison argues persuasively that Rukeyser's wartime experience produced this shift from proletarian politics to a pluralistic pragmatism.¹⁸ Critics have been drawn to discuss the *Partisan Review's* attack, which has become known as the 'Rukeyser Imbroglia', but much remains to be said about its invidious gender politics and investments in national security. The

¹⁵ Raphael C. Allison, 'Muriel Rukeyser goes to War: Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Politics of Ekphrasis', *College Literature*, 33.2 (Spring 2006), 1-29 (p. 1) <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/196477>> [accessed 14 August 2019].

¹⁶ Jeanne Perreault, 'Poetess Probed as Red: Muriel Rukeyser and the FBI', in *Modernism on File: Modern Writers, Artists, and the FBI, 1920-1950*, ed. Claire A. Culleton and Karen Leick (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 146.

¹⁷ Anon, 'Grandeur and Misery of a Poster-girl', *The Partisan Review* 10.5 (September 1943), 471-72 (p. 473) <<http://hgar-srv3.bu.edu/collections/partisan-review/search/detail?id=283947>> [accessed 14 August 2019].

¹⁸ Allison, 'Pragmatism', pp. 4, 21.

unacceptable transition or crossing outlined — from ‘proletarianism’ to ‘neo-Americanism’ — encapsulates the line of my argument, which tracks from one conflicted orthodoxy to another. Such allegations also begin to demonstrate the extent to which national and political identities are clearly at stake, and ways in which they might de-form and re-form, in the highly charged historical context of the Second World War.

To understand the fall-out from the war more concretely in terms of security policy, we must look to the emergence of McCarthyism at the end of the 1940s and to the introduction of two internal security acts — the Smith Act of 1948 and the McCarran Act of 1950. The Smith Act followed hard on the heels of the 1947 National Security Act, an ‘omnibus’ bill that set up almost all the leading institutions of American security bureaucracy and ‘articulated’ a national security ideology in direct response to the attack on Pearl Harbor.¹⁹ In Rukeyser’s Washington archives, a copy of an article from *The New Statesman and Nation* titled ‘Dangerous Thought in America’ describes the Smith Act as a ‘huge piece of legislation which... sternly restates the law about treason, sedition, and subversive activities’ and stresses that its critics consider it to be ‘a virulent form of print censorship’.²⁰ At the time of the *New Statesman* article’s publishing, there were seventeen people indicted of ‘conspiring to publish and circulate’ subversive Marxist literature, for which the maximum penalty was a 10,000 dollar fine and ten years’ imprisonment. These figures, which I draw directly from the *New Statesman* clipping, stress the potentially repressive tendencies of the Smith Act, especially for left-wing writers. These were tendencies of which Rukeyser was very much aware.

¹⁹ Douglas T. Stuart, *Creating the National Security State: A History of the Law That Transformed America* (Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 1-2.

²⁰ I:49, 11.

One of these indicted writers was V.J. Jerome. An internationally known Marxist scholar, in February 1951 Jerome had published an essay entitled ‘Grasp the Weapon of Culture’, a copy of which can be found in Rukeyser’s archive.²¹ On the grounds of publishing an inflammatory, Communistic essay, Jerome was charged with conspiracy in June 1951. Evidence of Rukeyser’s close knowledge of this case can be found in an archived letter inviting Rukeyser to help form a committee to defend Jerome in particular and intellectual freedom in general. In this letter, dated September 1951 and signed by FBI black-listed screenwriter Waldo Salt, Jerome’s indictment is characterized as a ‘test-case for all of us who work in a field which requires experiment, invention and creativity.’²² The threat to the ‘security of the imagination’ is of central concern to Salt, who warns that ‘there are few honest intellectuals in America who may not be subject to censorship for the expression, present or past, of non-conformist ideas.’²³ To consider an instance as a ‘test case’ is to frame that instance against the threat to a larger collective identity — in this instance, that of left-wing American intellectuals. A letter sent several months later by ‘The Committee to Defend V.J. Jerome: for intellectual and cultural freedom’ and signed by novelist Dashiell Hammett, who was also under FBI surveillance, explicitly links Jerome’s indictment to the Smith Act.²⁴ The flurry of literature produced by defence committees indicates the anxiety felt by the literary community and produced by the rise of securitization through the 1940s and into the 1950s.

The introduction of the McCarran Act two years later only compounded the fearful climate. Also known as the Subversive Activities Control Act, in 1950 the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

McCarran Act dramatically extended the reach of national security to require all communist organizations to register with the government, and to authorize the setting up of concentration camps in a situation of internal emergency.²⁵ President Truman himself vetoed the act, which was passed nevertheless, on the basis that ‘we will destroy all that we seek to preserve, if we sacrifice the liberties of our citizens in a misguided attempt to achieve national security.’²⁶ Other attempts to repeal the act leaned heavily on concepts of freedom and American identity. A letter to Rukeyser from the National Committee to Repeal the McCarran Act describes the act as an ‘un-American measure’, a ‘blot on our American democracy’ and a ‘serious threat to our way of life’, rhetoric that mimics that deployed by the House of Un-American Activities Committee for rather different purposes.²⁷ While dealing with the conflicted discourses of this time, it is imperative to ask: who wields the term ‘American’, and to what ends? Most famously, the musician and civil rights activist Paul Robeson had his passport revoked under the McCarran Act. The scholar and activist Dr. W.E.B. DuBois was also indicted under the act for failing to register the Peace Information Center, an anti-war organization that, according to the US Justice Department, was acting as a Soviet agent. In October 1951 a letter from the National Committee to Defend Dr. W.E.B. DuBois was sent out to potential supporters including Rukeyser.²⁸ The presence of these documents in Rukeyser’s archive, which she selected and saved herself, would seem to indicate a long-standing commitment to resisting the censorship of literature under the name of security. Characteristically, that commitment was not uncritical or dogmatic.

²⁵ Samuel Walker, *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 198.

²⁶ Pam Dixon, *Surveillance in America: An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, and the Law: A-Z* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2016), p. 418.

²⁷ 1:49, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

In a vivid illustration of Rukeyser's shifting political alignments, her archive preserves dozens of recalibrations and misgivings scribbled in the margins of the many documents Rukeyser received from organizing committees, solidarity groups and protest movements. Marginalia scribbled across some of these archived documents demonstrates Rukeyser's wariness of political contamination by association. Above the header of the first letter concerning V.J. Jerome, Rukeyser has hastily noted:

*A ~~difficult~~ particularly interesting case for me; since the issue is an article, I shall want to appear against the principle at work; since so many of Jerome's values are values I am against, I shall want to be particularly careful to write whatever I sign in this case.*²⁹

Here, we witness Rukeyser's intention to support intellectual freedom while simultaneously distancing herself from Jerome's trenchant Marxism. This double movement is embedded in Rukeyser's politics and her poetry; a movement both of resistance and defence. To be anti-anticommunist was not, despite the double negative, to be communist, as Alan Filreis has discussed.³⁰ Yet Rukeyser appears acutely aware that her position was likely to be conflated as such. Hence her memoranda to 'write whatever I sign', that is, to author her own words, rather than append her signature to the contaminating words of others. As Rukeyser writes in 'The Book of the Dead' (1938), 'all our meaning lies in this / signature'.³¹ The fine balance between collective solidarity and individual agency aimed at here, by refusing a straightforward alliance with either 'us' or 'them', resists the most reductive effects of national security measures.

Such resistance to being 'framed' is evident in Rukeyser's scribbled criticism of

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Alan Filreis, *Counter-revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry, 1945-1960* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), p. 119.

³¹ Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, p. 103.

the very piece of writing which saw Jerome indicted. On the front cover of Rukeyser's archived copy of 'Grasp the Weapon of Culture', a few scrawled lines tail off into illegibility:

*the frightful jargoning of those who would rather see starvation here — so no good could come — than admit to the [?], the various, the represen[?]*³²

The very illegibility of two of the three things that are go unacknowledged suggests that these scribblings are to some extent encrypted, wary of the full political expression that might, in this state of security, lead to arrest. The substance of Jerome's argument, that American culture needed to be reclaimed from capitalist, bourgeois and fascist influences, would appear to be one with which Rukeyser would broadly agree. However, Jerome's direct equation of 'Americanism' with 'fascism' conflicts with Rukeyser's (not uncritical) patriotism, and his dogmatic rhetoric leaves no room for Rukeyser's more expansive, 'various' and 'represen[tative?]' vision.

Inside and Outside Security

Rukeyser's opposition to 'frightful jargoning' on both the left and the right can be traced back to the early 1940s when she was working, surprising as it may seem, as a government propagandist. In 1942, Rukeyser was invited to join the Office of War Information's (OWI's) domestic branch, where she acted as liaison between the Graphics division and writers outside the OWI between 1942 and 1943. As part of the OWI's poster production team, Rukeyser worked in the field of text and image. The OWI, which eventually evolved into the Central Intelligence Agency, was described in

³² 1:49, 11.

a lengthy *Harper's Magazine* article from February 1943 as 'the most powerful information agency the country has ever known'.³³ While the OWI was a government propaganda agency, an institution that seems much at odds with Rukeyser's record of activism and civil disobedience, under the directorship of Elmer Davis it was predominantly focused on 'an ideological battle against fascism' rather than 'a militaristic exclusive concern for victory'.³⁴ In Allison's argument, Rukeyser's move towards political pragmatism led to her support of American intervention in World War II.³⁵ An examination of the OWI's external and internal conflicts further explicates why Rukeyser appeared to accept unquestioningly the imperative to produce American propaganda and work for the militaristic cause of foreign intervention, when throughout her life she was otherwise staunchly anti-war. In its initial incarnation, formed as it was by the crisis generated by US entry into the war, the OWI offered the possibility of radical change through its granting of agency to writers and artists normally alienated from political processes.³⁶

The period of Rukeyser's employment at the OWI has only relatively recently become the subject of some critical attention. For literary critic Jeanne Perreault, Rukeyser's short employment 'at the center of a bureaucratic power structure was a critical moment' in her life, that 'reveals much about her sense of self and nation'.³⁷ In her rich and insightful essay 'Egodocuments and the Ethics of Propaganda', Perreault draws on archival memoranda from Rukeyser's time at the OWI to enlarge and discuss the 'auto/biographical' concept of 'egodocuments'. While there is some thematic

³³ Michael Darrock and Joseph P. Dorn, 'Davis and Goliath: The OWI and its Gigantic Assignment', *Harper's Magazine* 186.1113 (February 1943), II:18, 10.

³⁴ Jeanne Perreault, 'Egodocuments and the Ethics of Propaganda', in *Tracing the Autobiographical*, ed. Marlene Kadar and others (Waterloo, Ont: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), p. 146.

³⁵ Allison, 'Pragmatism', pp. 4, 10.

³⁶ Hickman, *Crisis and the Avant-Garde*, p. 10.

³⁷ Perreault, 'Egodocuments', p. 162.

overlap, with one exception the archival documents Perreault discusses are not the same as those discussed here, and our methodologies are distinct. Perreault argues that ‘the egodocuments may support a world view, as well as a world, in which justice can be imagined’, and supplies a wealth of historical detail but no discussion of Rukeyser’s poetry.³⁸ According to Allison, Rukeyser’s time at the OWI has been ‘sometimes noted but rarely stressed’, and while Allison’s own invaluable research situates Rukeyser within the currents of pragmatist thought during the 1940s he does not examine material that documents her time at the OWI in great detail.³⁹ My argument seeks to fill in some of these critical gaps, and tracks the exchange between the literary and the non-literary in and around Rukeyser’s work, between war poster and war poem, between poetry magazine and FBI file. Here I take my lead from Rukeyser’s oft-quoted phrase that ‘poetry can extend the document’.⁴⁰ Unlike Perreault’s ‘auto/biographical’ or Allison’s ‘pragmatist’ study, I bring Rukeyser’s published poetry into contact with archival ephemera in a reading that is framed and inflected by the formative discourse of security.

The brevity of Rukeyser’s tenure at the OWI had entirely to do with security in the peculiar guise of anti-communist hysteria.⁴¹ By October 1942, shortly after America’s entry into the Second World War, Rukeyser had come to the attention of the national security services. Her FBI file details her poetic publications and lectures, and even essays analyses of these. In one example, the special agent concludes that ‘her symbols of revolt are imaginative’.⁴² The FBI’s compilation of her early publications

³⁸ Ibid, p. 145.

³⁹ Allison, ‘Pragmatism’, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Rukeyser, *U.S.I.* (New York: Convici, 1938), p. 146.

⁴¹ Conflicting critical accounts of Rukeyser’s reasons for leaving the OWI exist, as noted by Allison, ‘Pragmatism’, n.2, p. 24.

⁴² Report dated 5 May 1943, I:52.

and reviews amounts to a scholarly bibliography, underscoring the dialectical relation between literary criticism and methods of surveillance. A report in the *New York Journal-American* entitled ‘Poetess in OWI Here Probed by the U.S. as Red’ makes light of the allegation that Rukeyser ‘mixed considerable left-wing politics with her iambic pentameter’, but the investigation was serious enough that she subsequently resigned from her position at the OWI.⁴³ The fact that the *Journal-American* published an article on Rukeyser when there were at least 1,300 OWI employees under investigation testifies to her literary prominence as one of the ‘finer “young” poets’.⁴⁴ The substance of the allegation against Rukeyser rested upon the publication of her ‘pro-red’ poetry, reviews, articles and reportage in ‘Communist controlled publications’ including *New Masses*, *Communist Daily Worker* and the *Proletarian Anthology of American Literature*. Within Rukeyser’s FBI file, the transcript of an interview between a special agent and the ex-Communist editor Eugene Lyons concludes that the ‘most dangerous ones hide or deny their affiliations’.⁴⁵ Rukeyser was classed accordingly as a secret Communist sympathizer, a ‘fellow traveler’.⁴⁶ This was not her only experience of persecution under the auspices of security. Sarah Lawrence College, where Rukeyser taught in 1953, similarly had to defend its choice of teachers in the face of allegations of hiring ‘35 Communists and former Communists and fellow travelers’.⁴⁷ Long after leaving the OWI, into the 1970s, the FBI kept Rukeyser’s file open, closely following her teachings at the California Labor School and friendship with the Jewish émigré Hanns Eisler.

While she gained access to her FBI file only months before her death, Rukeyser

⁴³ *Journal-American*, 7 May 1943, I:52.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Statement of Eugene Lyons, 10 February 1943, 1:52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ II:18, 18.

was acutely aware, as we have seen, of the extent of US surveillance in the 1940s.⁴⁸ As early as 1944, in a less-discussed poem from *Letter to the Front*, Rukeyser writes of

the rat-faced investigator
 who sneers and asks, ‘Who is your favorite poet?’
 Voices of scissors and grinders asking their questions:
 ‘How did you ever happen to be against fascism?’
 [...]

 But this is a land where there is time, and time;
 This is the country where there is time for thinking.
 ‘Is he a ‘fellow-traveler’? — No. — Are you sure? — No.’
 The fear. Voices of clawhammers and spikes clinking.⁴⁹

In this lyric scene interrogators have verminous features and the metallic voices of instruments designed to cut, grind, strike and pierce. ‘Who is your favorite poet?’ is a plausible question for such an interrogator at a ‘time’ when to like the wrong poet, to be too stridently ‘against fascism’, is sufficient to be designated a ‘fellow-traveler’. The film-script-like line of dialogue conveys the climate of uncertainty produced by ‘the fear’ of interrogation. A longer tab between ‘fear.’ and ‘Voices’ indicates the ‘cutting off’ or severance Rukeyser always associates with fear, and produces a dramatic pause that is cinematic in its effect.⁵⁰ Rukeyser’s experience of cutting, editing and writing for motion pictures (she studied film editing in 1935, and collaborated on a number of film projects through the late 1930s and into the 1940s) deeply informs her modernist aesthetics. As she writes in her ‘modernist tract’, *The Life of Poetry*, ‘[t]he continuity of film, in which the writer deals with... a separate sound-track which is joined arbitrarily

⁴⁸ Jane Cooper, foreword to *The Life of Poetry*, p. xx.

⁴⁹ Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, p. 245.

⁵⁰ The figure of being ‘cut off’ occurs frequently in Rukeyser’s poetry in this decade: c.f. ‘cut off’/‘lopped off’ in *Collected Poems* pp. 203, 248, 303, 308, 310.

to the image-track, is closer to the continuity of poetry than anything else in art'.⁵¹ Ever the multidisciplinary, Rukeyser brought her knowledge of film-making as well as her theories of poetry to bear upon her propagandist work. The formal plurality of Rukeyser's work, as we shall see, is a function of its political plurality, and an evasion of the drive towards unity and fixity – whether of borders, of ideology or of identity – that underpins traditional notions of security.

Questions of identity, of who is adequately 'American', pervade and shape the deployment of US security and surveillance, no less in its investigation of the OWI than elsewhere. One of security's most significant functions is as a guarantee of identity, both individual and national.⁵² Security secures not only our sense of ourselves, but of *our* territorial identity, *our* prosperity and *our* way of life. In other words, security shores up a sense of national identity which is threatened but also constituted by the presence of the un-American 'other', whether racial or ideological.⁵³ A pernicious association between Communism and Jewishness compounded the level of surveillance directed towards employees of the OWI. Congressional charges against the OWI included the assertion that 'the agency harbored radicals, Communists and was heavily influenced by "international Jewry"'.⁵⁴ The Office of Security Services charged the OWI with being 'full of international left-wing Jews', and argued that its 'Jewish saturation makes its voice un-American in the Western ear'.⁵⁵ Rukeyser was Jewish, and acutely conscious of the complexities of this inheritance. 'My themes and the use I have made of them have depended on my life as poet, as a woman, as an American, and

⁵¹ Eileen Myles, 'Fear of Poetry', *The Nation*, April 14 1997; Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, p. 151.

⁵² Anthony Burke, *Beyond Security, Ethics and Violence: War Against the Other* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2007), p. 54.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁵⁴ Clayton D. Laurie, *The Propaganda Warriors: America's Crusade against Nazi Germany* (Kansas: Kansas University Press, 1996), p. 175.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

as a Jew', as she wrote in 1944. Janet Kaufman, among others, has detailed the 'aesthetic and moral centrality' of Jewishness to her work.⁵⁶ Although Rukeyser grew up at a distance from organized Judaism, her poem 'To Be a Jew' was adopted into the prayer books of both the American reform and reconstructionist Jewish movements. Despite the beginnings of a shift towards American-Jewish integration, the myth of Jewish Communism was still widespread, blurring distinctions between politics and race.⁵⁷ Such blurring is evident in allegations made by government security agencies and the 'right wing public' that the OWI was staffed by 'intellectual communist sympathizers' equipped with all the 'tools of a Jewish conspiracy'.⁵⁸ The OWI threatened American security and the coherence of the national identity from the inside.

Conversely, considering the charges of 'Jewish saturation' made against the OWI, the thought-piece in *Harper's* described the OWI as 'the American counterpart to Goebbels' string of official and unofficial Nazi propaganda agencies'.⁵⁹ While the full horrors of the Nazi 'final solution' were as yet mostly unknown, knowledge of Nazi anti-Semitism was widespread. Rukeyser sought to extricate American propaganda from Nazi methods in her refusal to deny the humanity of the enemy, her inclusion of slogans by working people and in her insistence on the 'real' purpose of the war, which was not merely to win, but to defeat fascism and promote democratic values under threat.⁶⁰ Perreault cites Curt Gentry's assessment of how in the 1940s 'pacifism became disloyalty [and] complaints about wages or working conditions were called "seditious utterances"', an example of how the democratic right to protest was constrained under

⁵⁶ Janet Kaufman, "But not the study": Writing as a Jew', in *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?: The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 33-45 (p. 45).

⁵⁷ André W. M. Gerrits, *The Myth of Jewish Communism: A Historical Interpretation* (Bruxelles: P. Lang, 2009), pp. 18-19.

⁵⁸ Perreault, 'Egodocuments', p. 146.

⁵⁹ II:18, 10.

⁶⁰ Perreault, 'Egodocuments', pp. 150-153.

the auspices of security and conflated with the unpatriotic.⁶¹ Distinctions between us and them, between friend and enemy, constitute the political state of security. The exclusion of the ‘other’ from states of security produced an uneasy commonality between American and Nazi propaganda agencies, as *Harper’s* astutely points out. While US security sought to establish a definite boundary between inside and outside, between American and un-American, at the heart of Rukeyser’s conception in *The Life of Poetry* is what Jane Cooper has called ‘an ideal of boundaries dissolved’.⁶²

Rukeyser was uniquely placed, as a leftist propagandist, American and Jew, a subject-inside-and-outside-security, to re-think and attempt to re-fashion concepts of enemy and citizen in government propaganda. Due to her short tenure, Rukeyser did not get far in the attempt, but briefs, notes, lists and drafts from her archive supply some examples of this attempted re-fashioning. Shortly before her resignation in April 1943, Rukeyser proposed a final exhibition of war posters, ‘Words at War’. A document entitled ‘Outline for an Exhibition’ prepared by Rukeyser and dated 6 April 1943 describes how ‘the show will... make the issues of the war clear’.⁶³ Rukeyser makes explicit her intention to prioritize the *informative* rather than the *promotional* function of propaganda, to edify rather than control the masses and to disseminate war news with a view to supplying an intelligent American public with sound and substantial information, a stance in line with that of poet Archibald MacLeish, the assistant director of the OWI. To that end, Rukeyser demanded that larger ‘war issues’ were to be brought into contact with everyday issues. Government instructions to ‘buy coal early’, ‘walk properly’, ‘clean the dinner-plate’ and so on must be situated, Rukeyser writes, against the wider contexts of ‘issues of the war, the nature of total warfare, and how we, as a

⁶¹ Perreault, *Modernism on File*, p. 147.

⁶² Cooper, foreword to Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, p. xxvii.

⁶³ II:18, 12.

growing democracy, are facing these issues'.⁶⁴ In so doing she challenges purely promotional propaganda and its tendency to proceed as though 'the audience, those at home in wartime, were not "citizens" or "people" but "customers"'.⁶⁵ While the remit to 'make the issues of the war clear' may not seem subversive in itself, it ran counter to the desire of the military to withhold information, and the concurrent commercial turn of the OWI.

Posters, like poems... are weapons

On 14 April 1943, a number of writers resigned on the grounds that the OWI was increasingly controlled by 'high pressure promoters who prefer slick salesmanship to honest information'.⁶⁶ A month later, Rukeyser's own press release cites the reason for her resignation as a 'matter of disagreement on basic policy', and emphasizes again the distinction between informational and promotional propaganda:

It is Miss Rukeyser's feeling that war posters must deal directly with the important issues of the war [...] Miss Rukeyser has worked on posters which attempt effective and vivid treatments of daily problems. In her work at the Graphics Division, she has been able to stop copy like 'For Cash and Country. CUT LOGS NOW' and 'Fish For Freedom. Fish For Victory.' Posters carrying copy like that are now coming through, while a series on the nature of the enemy, and posters reading 'Farmers — Victory is in your hands' and 'The world we fight for — where all may grow' have never been released. The other kind of poster is now coming out, under a set-up which seems to advocate war posters as close to commercial ads of a low level as possible.⁶⁷

The distinction between the two types of slogan may appear fine, but the difference

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, p. 152.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 152.

⁶⁷ I:54, 12.

between imperatives to ‘Fish for Victory’ and the vision for peace implied in ‘where all may grow’ was deeply significant not only to Rukeyser and her like-minded colleagues but to the authorities who felt it necessary to suppress all but the most simplistic ‘commercial’ propaganda. Some years later, Rukeyser recalled the commercial takeover of the OWI as a battle of ideas, which ‘the advertising men won, with those who decided that this was not a war against fascism, that it was a war to be won, and the meaning worked out afterward.’⁶⁸ Promotional, unthinking propaganda superseded Rukeyser’s informative, democratic vision.

Another archival document, Rukeyser’s resignation letter, further articulates her understanding of the relation between war posters, politics and poetry:⁶⁹

War posters must declare, powerfully and continually, the real issues of the war. Posters, like poems, are vivid and concise emblems of the spirit; these words and images are weapons.

In the last months of the OWI, posters that declare war issues in terms of the enemy, our friends, and what we fight for have been suppressed, either through a policy of playing down the issues of the war or through fear of these issues. [...]

In a war for freedom and responsibility, each of us is bound to the people — not only to the American people and our fighting allies, but also implacably against all fascists - never to lose sight of these values. Any action against those values slows down the war, kills men and issues.

⁶⁸ Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, p. 152.

⁶⁹ Perreault notes how Rukeyser’s analysis of the ‘advertising men’ ‘clearly shows that she saw the official political stance she took as part of her “life in poetry”’, ‘Egodocuments’, p. 159.

A world is to be fought for, sung and built. Its values must be defended by our government information program; the American people are alive to the issues, and part of our freedom and our responsibility is continually to bring more life - our lives - to our belief.⁷⁰

The last line of this lyrical prose foreshadows the essay on the ‘security of the imagination’ in which the triangulation of freedom, life and belief is reaffirmed, with the trenchant addition of ‘rebellion’. Eight years before Jerome published ‘Grasp the Weapon of Culture’, Rukeyser figures posters, poems, words and images as the cultural armory against censorship at home and fascism abroad. The notion of an ideological war is repeated in the metaphorical equation of ‘kills men and issues’. Loss of life is not equated to the loss of an ideological battle: to win the war of ideas, Rukeyser contests, is to attain peace and save those lives. Allison finds that Rukeyser ‘prized’ the war-poster for its capacity to embody the logic of social or political pluralism by virtue of its composite medium, that is, in its combination of word and image.⁷¹ A direct correspondence between political poetry and political praxis has been astutely challenged by Hickman in his recent publication *Crisis and the Avant-Garde*.⁷² The war-poster, however, in its production, dissemination and purpose, intervenes decisively in the political organization of a nation.

The *fear* Rukeyser cites as a factor in the suppression of anti-fascist war posters connects not only rising fear and rising security but aesthetic form and political praxis. Her resignation letter demonstrates the consistent largeness of vision that always, insistently, locates propaganda as a means of ensuring that ‘the American people are alive to the issues’ and of heightening the nation’s critical consciousness, which

⁷⁰ I:54, 12.

⁷¹ Allison, ‘Pragmatism’, p. 5.

⁷² Hickman, *Crisis and the Avant-Garde*, pp. 1-2.

Rukeyser defines as ‘the capacity to make change in existing conditions’.⁷³ Such work was urgently necessary at a time when the ‘policy was to win the war first, and work out the meanings afterward. The result was, of course, that the meanings were lost. You cannot put these things off’.⁷⁴ For Rukeyser and like-minded colleagues, the appointment of ‘advertising men’ such as the new head of division, a former vice-president of the Coca Cola Company, marked the end of the possible production of ‘real’ war posters.⁷⁵ According to David Bergman, ‘[a]dvertising people did not want to foster the “critical mind” because it was just such critical intelligence that hampered their work hawking products.’⁷⁶ The commercialization of the OWI marked the shoring up of democratic security through corporate means, marooning Rukeyser’s methods between anti-capitalist fascism and pro-capitalist democracy.

Even as Rukeyser resigned, she challenged the ‘cutting off’ of her ability to address in her posters ‘our enemies, our allies, and what we fight for’ by organizing one last exhibition of both ‘accepted and rejected material’ in 1943.⁷⁷ Among this ‘rejected material’ was a proposed ‘series on the nature of the enemy’, which along with her ‘program, and these posters, have been suppressed’. The ‘Words at War’ exhibition was indeed held at New York Public Library in June 1943. It included a series titled ‘The Nature of the Enemy’ that explicitly aimed to erode the ‘otherness’ of the enemy upon which the state of security so crucially depends. The typed, hand-annotated ‘Outline for an Exhibition’ explains that

the series on the Enemy does not show the Germans and Japanese, for example, as brutalized and individual soldiers. It isolates a set of characteristics – suppression,

⁷³ Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, p. xi.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷⁵ April 1 1943, II:8, 12.

⁷⁶ Bergman, ‘Ajanta’, p. 563.

⁷⁷ II:8, 12.

slavery, starvation, torture and murder – stamps them as the method of the enemy and...
the qualities we fight against...⁷⁸

By diverting the focus away from the demonizing of entire nations and onto ‘fascist’ forces instead, these posters refuse reductive representations of nationalism and militarism. Each poster took as its subject either suppression, starvation, torture or murder and the same caption: ‘This is the method of the enemy / we fight to destroy fascism / WE FIGHT TO BUILD A FREE WORLD’.⁷⁹ To illustrate ‘starvation’, Rukeyser chose an image by German artist and printmaker Käthe Kollwitz, known for her ‘stark images of suffering at home’ and subversion ‘of the image of the safe homeland by showing the true face of the devastation there’.⁸⁰ Kollwitz was commissioned to design posters in the 1920s for anti-war and humanitarian socialist causes, and experienced censorship and persecution under both the Wilhelmine and Nazi regimes.⁸¹ Rukeyser’s attempt to use Kollwitz’s drawings of starving German children in her poster designs was blocked however by the ‘advertising men’.⁸² Kollwitz resurfaces instead in a poem.

One of Rukeyser’s ‘Lives’, a series of lyrical biographies, titled ‘Käthe Kollwitz’, makes clear Rukeyser’s close identification with Kollwitz:

Held between two wars
my lifetime
among wars, the big hands of the world of death
my lifetime

⁷⁸ II:18, 12.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Claire C. Whitner, and De V. M. F. R. Kets, *Käthe Kollwitz and the Women of War: Femininity, Identity, and Art in Germany During World Wars I and II* (Wellesley, MA: Davis Museum at Wellesley College, 2016), p. 23.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 25.

⁸² Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, p. 137.

listens to yours.
 [...]

 waiting for
 the unknown person
 held in the two hands, you.⁸³

Although ‘my lifetime / listens to yours’ and both are ‘held in the two hands’, Kollwitz remains ‘unknown’. As Catherine Gander argues, this poem does not aim to overcome Kollwitz’s semiotic or ontological alterity, but to transmit a ‘profound identification’.⁸⁴ Gander reads this poem as an ‘ekphrastic text’, due to its verbal representations of Kollwitz’s visual art, and frames her reading of ‘Käthe Kollwitz’ with W.T.J. Mitchell’s work on ekphrastic poetry as ‘the genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic “others”’.⁸⁵ Mitchell argues that ‘like the masses, the colonized, the powerless and voiceless everywhere, visual representation cannot represent itself’, and finds that ekphrastic discourse offers the only possibility of representation.⁸⁶ Allison defines ekphrasis as the formal mode of democratic pluralism, and finds that the war-poster captures this political pluralism in its combination of media forms.⁸⁷ In ‘Käthe Kollwitz’ Rukeyser realises such pluralism not through the form of the war poster but in poetry. The poem keeps frames (‘held between’) and fluidity (‘lives showing / through their bodies’) in play, and resists totalizing tendencies in its recognition – rather than erasure – of difference.

In the attempt to overcome alterity, Rukeyser’s posters take as their subject not only the external but the internal other. A poster that confronts the issue of race

⁸³ Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, pp. 460-461.

⁸⁴ Gander, *Rukeyser and Documentary*, pp. 94-5.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 93.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 94.

⁸⁷ Allison, ‘Pragmatism’, p. 3.

relations uses an image by social realist artist Ben Shahn, who worked at the OWI briefly between 1942-1943. One of the ‘enemy’ posters overlays Shahn’s ambiguous image of a white welder, blank-eyed behind reflective goggles, and a black welder, face exposed but downcast, with the caption ‘1/5 of our strength must not be lost through discrimination’.⁸⁸ There are Soviet-esque pylons reflected in the white welder’s goggles, and a protruding bolt that recalls Futurist mechanical art. The same imagery makes propaganda for communism, fascism and social democracy. Yet the combination of word and image marks out this propaganda not as nefarious manipulation but as an emergent form of modern media, pushing for socially progressive change. The joining of the words ‘manpower’ and ‘strength’ with an image in which blackness and whiteness are juxtaposed must be read as an act of some defiance, in the face of the New Deal’s recent alliance with America’s white-supremacist South in the name of democracy and security.⁸⁹ With the weapon of graphic design, Rukeyser transgresses one version of democratic security and proposes another in its place. There was a carefully planned distribution strategy for these posters — ‘Manpower’ was destined for Atlanta, where ‘there is much friction between the races’.⁹⁰ The attempt to initiate a fully egalitarian vision of American society via the instruments of word and image was a direct challenge to the state of security. Bringing these subjects-outside-security into the heart of the nation-state (or at any rate its propaganda offices) challenged both the assumptions and the security of the American political constitution.

The war did not melt away

⁸⁸ II:18, 12.

⁸⁹ Katznelson argues forcefully that this alliance was ‘the most deeply inscribed compromise’ of the New Deal, one which however ‘secured democracy, perhaps against the odds’, *Fear Itself*, p. 486.

⁹⁰ Perreault, ‘Egodocuments’, p. 154.

While her career as a ‘poster-girl’ came to an end, the exercise in working under considerable constraint to convey an alternative vision of democracy to the public at the OWI remained heavily influential for Rukeyser’s sequence of long poems *Elegies*, written through the 1940s and published in 1949.⁹¹ The *Elegies* articulate the experience of sustaining an embattled political position, one which clashed both with conservative views and with those leftists (of whom there were many) who opposed the war. The attendant tensions and compromises rise to the surface in ‘Ninth Elegy: The Antagonists’, where shifts of frame hold both individuated and social subjects in suspension:

Pieces of animals, pieces of all my friends
 prepare assassinations while I sleep.
 They shape my being, a gallery of lives
 fighting within me, and all unreconciled.
 Before them move my waking dreams, and ways
 of the spirit, and simple action. Among these
 I can be well and holy. Torn by them I am wild,
 smile, and revenge myself upon my friends
 and find myself among my enemies.⁹²

The speaker of this lyric finds herself in a space where distinctions between friends and enemies become osmotic and unfixed. Violence, struggle and betrayal marks these shifts and allegiances. Dogged by the hostility of conservative agencies on one side and attacked by left-wing polemicists such as the anonymous author of ‘The Grandeur and Misery of a Poster-Girl’ on the other, Rukeyser found herself ‘among her enemies’

⁹¹ Clive Bush, *The Century’s Midnight: Dissenting European and American Writers in the Era of the Second World War* (Witney: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 383.

⁹² Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, p. 257.

whichever way she turned. The multiple subjects figured as ‘a gallery of lives / fighting within me’ invite a reading that enlarges the lyric ‘I’ and goes beyond the biographical to conceive of the body of the poem as the body politic, and its violent fragmentations (‘torn’, ‘fighting within’) as the internal divisions of a securitized nation state.

The suspicious, securitized climate of the time infiltrated left-wing organizations as well as propaganda offices. Prior to their 1943 attack on the ‘Poster-Girl’, the avant-garde *Partisan Review* had published Rukeyser’s poetry, which was taken as evidence by the FBI of her communistic tendencies. Conversely, the *Partisan Review* came to be funded by none other than the American security services in the 1950s, in an attempt to fuel anti-communist feeling.⁹³ What has become known as the ‘Rukeyser Imbroglio’ was a highly gendered attack which depicted Rukeyser as having ‘plumped’ for revolution, a puerile term that denies much agency on the part of its subject. This term sets the pattern for the piece: Rukeyser is caricatured as incompetent, fickle and promiscuous. Weaponizing their own erudition, the authors allege that Rukeyser ‘rode the bandwagon of proletarian literature’, ‘cried Yes like Molly Bloom to the working class’ and deployed ‘the orgiastic diction’ of D.H. Lawrence ‘at his worst’.⁹⁴ More explicitly still, her ‘indiscriminate friendship makes for promiscuity’, and other disciplinary boundary-crossings are characterized as signs of inconsistency, opportunism and superficiality.⁹⁵ Her style is critiqued for its ‘inexact adjectives and dangling participles’ and her most recent publication *Wake Island* (1942) deemed a hack ‘poster-poem’. Rukeyser’s title refers to the battle over Wake Island, which was

⁹³ See Patrick Iber, ‘The Spy Who Funded Me: Revisiting the Congress for Cultural Freedom’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 11 June 2017 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-spy-who-funded-me-revisiting-the-congress-for-cultural-freedom/>> [accessed 14 August 2019]

⁹⁴ Anon, *Partisan Review*, p. 472.

⁹⁵ Rukeyser wrote a biography of a physicist, Willard Gibbs, in addition to her work as poet, critic and lecturer.

contemporaneous with the attack on Pearl Harbor and marked the United States' entry into World War Two.

The *Partisan Review* was not alone in deeming *Wake Island* a 'very bad' and jingoistic poem.⁹⁶ Allison concurs that it is very much a 'poster-poem'.⁹⁷ Yet it remains a component of Rukeyser's vision that poetry should respond to questions of social justice, freedom and history, both local and global.⁹⁸ It is the only poetry published during Rukeyser's time at the OWI, and she excluded it from the first edition of her *Collected Poems* in 1978 for reasons that can only be surmised.⁹⁹ Bergman defends the poem, suggesting that Rukeyser chose to work within a popular rhetorical form — that of war poetry, rather than posters — to express unpopular sentiments.¹⁰⁰ Mid-way through the poem, Rukeyser again addresses the figure of 'cutting off', division and disunity:

The world's the only island, and our men
and women fight one war; it will be won again.

They were never cut off from us. We were cut off

from them.

The world as island may represent either universal isolation or unification. In the next line, 'one' slips homonymically into 'won', suggesting a triumphant unity. The ambivalence of the last two quoted lines shifts the responsibility for social cohesion across from 'they' to 'we'. *Wake Island* constitutes another failed attempt to re-fashion concepts of enemy and friend, of us and them, in a hostile mainstream medium.

⁹⁶ Bergman, pp. 566-68.

⁹⁷ Allison, 'Pragmatism', p. 12.

⁹⁸ Hickman, *Crisis and the Avant-Garde*, p. 55.

⁹⁹ See Editors' Notes, Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, pp. xxv-xxvi.

¹⁰⁰ Bergman, 'Ajanta', p. 469.

The anonymous writers of ‘the Poster-Girl’ also take issue with Rukeyser’s recently published article ‘Words and Images’ in *The New Republic*. ‘Words and Images’ sets out her theory of formal multiplicity, in which words reinforce the meaning of an image.¹⁰¹ Again, Rukeyser ‘plumps’ for posters, which in the words of the polemicists unite ‘the Detroit race riots... the food problems... [and] the man-power situation with the necessity for good posters’.¹⁰² As if responding directly to Rukeyser’s resignation letter, the writer mocks the notion ‘that a poet with a poster can win the war’.¹⁰³ Predominantly, the attack is upon Rukeyser’s claim to a viable political position and upon the ‘words and images’ that constitute the main source of her power. The means of attack are heavily misogynistic. Her democratic vision is reduced to another cartoon, her version of Roosevelt’s ‘four freedoms’ lampooned as ‘free verse, free love, free lunch, free-for-all’. This last jibe is a variation on a theme in this history: Shahn’s parting gesture to the OWI was a poster depicting a four-armed Statue of Liberty, each arm holding aloft not a torch but a bottle of Coca-Cola. The poster’s text, with some small variations in different reports, read ‘The War that Refreshes: The Four Delicious Freedoms’.¹⁰⁴ Rukeyser’s affiliations with both establishment and communist groups, her disturbance of both bourgeois humanism and classical Marxism, and her compound identity as American, woman and Jew, saw her attacked on all sides.¹⁰⁵ As Bergman pithily puts it: ‘the attacks on her for not following the political orthodoxy are, therefore, fused with her failure to follow poetic orthodoxy’.¹⁰⁶ It does not seem excessive to claim that the attacks have as much to do with Rukeyser crossing lines of

¹⁰¹ Allison, ‘Pragmatism’, p. 5.

¹⁰² Anon, *Partisan Review*, p. 473.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 64.

¹⁰⁵ John Lowney, *History, memory, and the literary left: modern American poetry, 1935-1968* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), p. 41.

¹⁰⁶ Bergman, ‘Ajanta’, p. 555.

gender as they do with the crossing of lines of politics or poetry.

An extraordinary and understudied lyric Rukeyser published in *One Life* (1957), titled ‘Willkie – Stopless Falling Through Air’, brings questions of conflict, binaryism and gender into conceptual contact. *One Life* was inspired by the life of the pragmatic politician Wendell Willkie, a collection of poems and documents that illustrates the ‘intensity of Rukeyser’s genre experimentation’, as this lyric exemplifies:¹⁰⁷

If you look at your succession of desires,
 A running flame, a parade of leaders
 Chosen for representing true your need

[...]

They have threatened us with the penalties of division
 What became of the war, the sea of immense soldiery

[...] The war did not melt away.

[...]

Questionnaire. Write on two sides of the paper only.

[...]

When you say Peace, do you think War? Two seconds.

When they say Female, do you think Male? Two seconds.

When they say Good, do you think Evil? Two seconds

We have given you, always the opposites. Submit.

[...]

You may choose in your own voice, and every day.

You need not ever accept their ideas of guilt,

¹⁰⁷ Editors’ Notes to Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, p. xxvii.

You need not accept their ideas of innocence.

One voice will say in the sounds of penalties,

War and No-War, Good and No-Good, Male and No-Male¹⁰⁸

The lyric immediately aligns desire and ‘a parade of leaders’, as if ‘your succession of desires’ were analogous to political authority. The more conventionally poetic ‘running flame’ analogy binds together the farther-flung comparison. In each instance, a continuous movement (‘succession’, ‘running’, ‘parade’) describes the object and sets up the long, non-historically specific sweep of the lyric. Already by the third line, the lexicon of democracy — ‘chosen’, ‘representing’ — has been reduced to the mere semblance of agency. Desire conceived as no more than a ‘parade’ of democratic election is an impoverished conception indeed. The term ‘parade’ evokes showiness, performance and spectacle. Rukeyser here raises the spectre of the society of the spectacle, wherein desire becomes no more than another manufactured product that operates to perpetuate the structures of consumer-driven capitalist democracy.

Rukeyser, as we have seen, is well aware of the relation of consumerism to war. Whatever ‘war’ is at stake in these lines, it remains a nebulous, generalized conflict. The world wars, the Spanish Civil War, the Vietnam war and the Cold War preoccupied Rukeyser’s poetic and activist energies throughout her life. The war that ‘did not melt away’ is then the long international series of wars of the twentieth century, whose persistence makes a mockery of the division between ‘Peace’ and ‘War’, but also the rise of securitization that was catalyzed by those wars. The lyric, too, makes a mockery of these divisions with the ‘Questionnaire’ conceit, which reduces the duration of the

¹⁰⁸ Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978), p. 319. Gander describes *One Life*, from which this poem is taken, as ‘the best example of how Rukeyser merged poetic biography and documentary filmic techniques’, p. 98.

war to a quick-fire response. The questions pre-empt a binary response: ‘yes or no’, ‘we have given you, always the opposites.’ The agency of the addressee is revealed to be illusory within a structure that denies dissension from its basic categories.

Opposing not only war to peace, but male to female and good to evil, Rukeyser sketches out the dominant binaries that shape conflict and desire — binaries, it should be said, prevalent in much propaganda. Such binary-enforcement is coercive, issued in ‘the sounds of penalties’. Although femininity is conventionally aligned with no-war or peace, it aligns less neatly with either good or no-good. In the lyric ‘questionnaire’, ‘male’ and ‘war’ are structurally and semantically aligned with evil, ‘female’ and ‘peace’ with good. In the last line, however, ‘female’ equates to ‘no-good’, that is, with evil, but also with lack, with an absence or aporia — no-war, no-male, no-good. The domain of war is indisputably a masculine domain. What is under dispute in this lyric is the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘no-good’, and the question of how these ethical dimensions are constructed and gendered. In the *Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser is critical of the way in which the ‘interplay’ between good and evil is denied by the conventional binary division between these two poles.¹⁰⁹ In the format that structures the poem, the interrogative questionnaire, the lines fall on either side of patriotic or non-patriotic, with us or against us, secure or insecure. Rukeyser incorporates but also interrupts these binaries, in part through assertions such as ‘[y]ou need not accept their ideas of innocence’, and in part through the parodic redeployment of a non-poetic form.

In 1940s America, as now, masculine logics of militarism, patriarchy and hetero-normativity structured the workings of national security. In her poetry as well as her work as a propagandist, Rukeyser resists *and* incorporates such logics. Hence the

¹⁰⁹ Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, p. 64.

militaristic rhetoric by which posters and poems are ‘weapons’, and binary, reductive forms such as the questionnaire and the poster-slogan are incorporated, de-formed and re-formed in pluralistic, un-fixed assemblages. In response to the lived experience of war, fear and surveillance, Rukeyser attempted to break open constraints on political representation through word and image. Her involvement in the creation of war posters was premised upon her commitment to represent and shape the popular imaginary. As Rukeyser put it, in her notes on ‘Words at War’, ‘as a whole country, we need the images and words which will strengthen our lives, for war and for peace’.¹¹⁰ Crucially, ‘the image, the word, the note—those are methods by which the imaginative experience is presented and received.’¹¹¹ Rukeyser instrumentalises poetry and posters as ‘weapons’ in the name of a social modernism that sought to transform its public, not through fascist indoctrination, but through an expansive, inclusive and fearless poetics.

Remarkable for her resistance to dogmatism, even as Rukeyser retained her idealist vision of the possibilities of democracy she took social action against American democracy’s many flaws and shortcomings. The current resurgence of divisive, nationalistic politics in the US, heavily reliant upon a rhetoric of security, indicates the extent to which the ‘war made in our imaginations’ is ongoing. Security in its current form, in the words of Judith Butler, ‘serves the decimation of democratic rights and democracy itself’.¹¹² We still require ‘all our lives’, ‘more liberty, more rebellion, more belief’. There will be a great deal of political talk about security in this century.

¹¹⁰ II:18, 12.

¹¹¹ Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, p. 39.

¹¹² Judith Butler and Christian Salmon, ‘Trump, fascism, and the construction of ‘the people’: An interview with Judith Butler’, *Verso Blog* (29 December 2016) <<http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3025-trump-fascism-and-the-construction-of-the-people-an-interview-with-judith-butler>> [accessed 14 August 2019].

