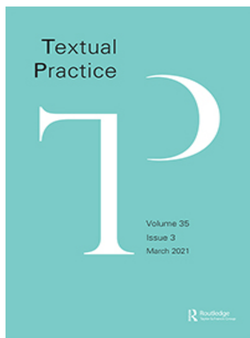

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Toward a resource poetics in Muriel Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead* and Mark Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary*

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ABSTRACT
Muriel Rukeyser's 1936 documentary poem *The Book of the Dead* appropriates various forms of textual evidence to document a devastating mining disaster that occurred in 1930 in rural Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. Written in the aftermath of the post-2008 financial crisis, Mark Nowak's 2009 text *Coal Mountain Elementary* revisits the same landscape Rukeyser had sought out seventy years earlier, and makes use of a similar technique as it combines reports of a 2006 mine explosion in Sago, West Virginia, with news reports from Chinese mining accidents and other materials. Both poems dramatise the distance separating extractivism-vulnerable landscapes of the periphery (rural, or in Nowak's case, global) from the accumulation of profits in the core. In reading these two texts side-by-side, it becomes clear that beyond their thematic similarities, the two poems also engage and adapt a methodology I call 'resource poetics', in which extractivist practices are exposed to view through poems' material incorporation of textual artefacts testifying to their ruinous effects. As such, the two poems, situated roughly seventy-five years apart, offer trenchant critiques of modernity in its extractivist mode.

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Written at the height of the Depression, Muriel Rukeyser's 1936 documentary poem *The Book of the Dead* chronicles a notorious 'incident' that occurred in 1930 in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia: in one of the worst industrial disasters in US history, at least 764 workers, many of them migrant African Americans, died due to acute silicosis contracted in the course of a large-scale drilling operation, while the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation, the company responsible for the operation, denied responsibility. Rukeyser's poem

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documents the crisis that ensued through its splicing together of eyewitness testimonies, medical examinations, and company stock reports, among other textual artefacts, which it combines with poetic evocations of the West Virginia landscape. In its incorporation of such materials, the poem deftly suggests the relationships between nature, political economy, and social practice, exposing the status of West Virginia as a marginal and therefore exploitable landscape within the Depression-era corporate state. Through the workings of extractivism, *The Book of the Dead* suggests, the modern US nation became a space marked by metropolises built on concentrations of wealth and social power, in turn supported by 'zones of sacrifice' whose resources—mineral, vegetable, and human—were regarded as ripe for the taking. Standing at the other end of modernity, in a time when the uneven geographies wrought by extractivist capitalism have both intensified and become globalised, Mark Nowak's 2009 text *Coal Mountain Elementary* enacts a critique very similar to Rukeyser's, and Nowak has noted Rukeyser's influence on his own blend of writing and labour activism. Nowak's text revisits the same landscape Rukeyser had sought out seventy-five years earlier and makes use of a similar technique as it intercuts transcriptions from testimony by employees and rescue workers about a 2006 mine explosion in Sago, West Virginia, that killed twelve miners, with lesson plans for children about coal mining, journalistic reports of mining accidents in contemporary China, and photographs.

The Appalachian geography these poetic texts inscribe bears a uniquely fraught relationship with American modernity in its extractivist mode. As Catherine Venable Moore's recent introduction to Rukeyser's poem indicates, West Virginia has been subjected for generations to what she identifies as 'the outsized influence of extractive industries', a process that continues into the present, as Nowak's poem makes clear.[1] As a sacrifice zone within an industrialised (and increasingly financialized) national interior, West Virginia is, according to Rebecca Scott's cultural history of the Appalachian coal fields, 'contradictorily located both at the heart of the national industrial market economy and within a marginalised mountain rurality', in which narratives of rural backwardness play into conceptions of the region's expendability.[2] Bob Johnson likewise characterizes Appalachia as being perched 'on the hard edges of the global mineral frontier',[3] and insists that 'a systemic social trauma accompanies our world's scarred mineral frontiers and drives up the external costs of combusting carbon'.[4] The processes documented in Rukeyser and Nowak's poems, including the ravaging of the landscape and the willingness to sacrifice miners' lives for profits, can thus be situated within a longer history of the region spanning from the nineteenth century into the present, in which the notion of Appalachia as an impoverished rural hinterland goes hand-in-hand with the production of the modernised nation itself, as the region continues to play its part in the process by

which extractivist modes underwrite and secure the progressive growth that characterizes modernity as such.

Both poems dramatise the distance separating extractivism-vulnerable landscapes of the periphery—rural, or in Nowak's case, global—from the accumulation of profits in the (post)industrial metropolitan core. I account here for the homologies that emerge when we compare these two poetic texts by exploring their mutual articulation of what I propose to call a 'resource poetics', a series of staged encounters between text and social-material context that have the effect of bringing extractivist practices into view, exposing the material, infrastructural, and economic frameworks undergirding such practices to analysis and critique. Crucially, scholars working in the environmental and energy humanities including Rob Nixon, Imre Szeman, and Jennifer Wenzel have recently turned their attention toward what they identify as an impasse that occurs when we attempt to 'apprehend' (Nixon's term) our own resource dependence.[5] Our difficulties in visualising the processes of resource extraction lead to an inability to conceptualise our own situatedness within the global matrix of extractivist (post)modernity. In response to this impasse, Bellamy, O'Driscoll, and Simpson have recently proposed the term 'resource aesthetics' as a shorthand for what they describe as a 'cultural practice yet also critical method' that lies in attending to the problems of representing the often invisible material underpinnings of energy economies:

> Resource aesthetics can be said to provoke the contradictions between the instrumental and the beautiful, the literal and figurative, extraction and its representation, in a way that might return the question of visibility to a consideration of the material requirements of aesthetic production, while at the same time insisting on the aesthetics of resource extraction and the recognition of infrastructure as form.[6]

For Bellamy et al., 'the aesthetic accounts for the knotted density yet disbursed intimacy of our unremarked assumptions about the world and the lines of force and power with which they are enmeshed'.[7] In proposing the idea of a resource poetics, I aim to build upon this idea of resource aesthetics by putting it into dialogue with the discourse of ecopoetics.[8] Bringing the notion of the poetic into the discussion enables me to draw attention to the forms of making that inhere in texts that self-consciously render visible the acquisitive logic of extractivism. As a set of textual strategies, resource poetics utilises the specific rhetorical capacities of poetry to encode our relationship with extractivist practices on both thematic and structural levels. On a discursive level, both *The Book of the Dead* and *Coal Mountain Elementary* take extractivism and its effects as their subject matter. They also, however, enact a deeper critique as they render visible the interrelationships between nature, labour, the state, and corporate power by incorporating material fragments of the

discourses surrounding extractivist processes including stock reports, congressional testimonies, chemical formulas, news bulletins, eyewitness accounts, and in Nowak's case, photographs. Adapted as a form of reading, resource poetics enables engagements with poetic texts that venture beyond the thematic and the symptomatic to examine the resource logics in which both poems and material histories participate. Approaching *The Book of the Dead* and *Coal Mountain Elementary* through the idea of a resource poetics thus facilitates a fresh attentiveness to the ways in which these texts intervene in material practices as they allow us to glimpse the dense web of relations suturing together state and corporate power, regional and global economies, land-based material resources, and labouring bodies over modernity's *longue durée*.

1. Rukeyser's resource poetics and Depression-era modernity

In response to the onset of the Depression, the state assumed an ever-greater role in resource management, as in large-scale efforts to industrialise the national interior such as the Tennessee Valley Authority. Created in 1933, during the crucial 'first hundred days' of Roosevelt's New Deal, this massive public utility project consisted in constructing dams on the Tennessee River and its tributaries to produce hydroelectric power to bring backwards and impoverished communities and households into the grid.[9] Beleaguered from the start by its detractors' accusations of governmental overreach and nascent socialism that drew comparisons to the Soviet Union's mass social and economic engineering projects, the TVA was justified by its proponents as a partnership between business and government, which Roosevelt himself described as 'a corporation clothed with the power of government but possessed of the flexibility and initiative of a private enterprise'.[10] Pursued under the aegis of developmentalist narratives, such projects were conducted in the name of the public good, yet they relied on state-corporate partnerships that were often quite lucrative for the latter. Moreover, such projects—as versions of what Marshall Berman once described as a 'Faustian model' of economic development—often contributed to the immiseration of those they were intended to aid, as in the case of the TVA, in which local populations saw their lifeways upended through their forced removal from the valleys slated to become reservoirs through the construction of dams.[11]

In a related vein, the Hawk's Nest Tunnel in West Virginia, itself a project of the early years of the Depression, was licensed as a public utility to create a hydroelectric dam on the New River under the New Kanawha Power Project, and thus electrify the surrounding valley, bringing it within the scope of developmentalist modernity. Yet it was ultimately undertaken for private profit: the power generated by the plant fed by the water diverted into the tunnel, rather than being put to use to electrify towns and settlements in

the surrounding region, was used instead by the nearby metallurgical plant.[12] Meanwhile, the silica removed in the course of drilling the tunnel, a process carried out by the Rinehart and Dennis Company under contract with Union Carbide, was sold to the Electro-Metallurgical Company, a Union Carbide subsidiary, for use in processing steel. Taking advantage of an atmosphere of deregulation and a depressed regional economy reeling from the effects of the 1929 crash, this massive hydroelectric project thus appropriated the region's abundant energy and mineral resources as it reproduced the already established narrative of the region's marginality, replacing its earlier association with coal mining with an ultimately more destructive form of extractivism modelled on—but crucially differing from—the early New Deal's massive public works projects. In his comprehensive occupational health-oriented history of the disaster, Cherniack describes the 'breakneck and authoritarian operation at Hawk's Nest' and confirms the latter's relationship with New Deal projects like the TVA: 'The Hawk's Nest Tunnel was built by one prestigious national corporation and overseen by another. It might best be compared to the federally supervised hydraulic projects of the Southeast and West'.[13] In what we might think of, following Jennifer Wenzel, as the 'extractivist gaze', a 'progressive and acquisitive gaze that perceives the world *as a reservoir of potential value to be extracted and accumulated*', human and natural resources are reduced to the laws of profit and loss.[14] The Hawk's Nest Tunnel was a prime instance of this peculiar form of seeing that reduces humans and nature alike to extractable values. In revisiting Rukeyser's seminal long poem here, I intend to call attention to the poem's undermining of the extractivist gaze through its exposure of the resource logic undergirding it.

A 3 June 1931 article that ran in the Fayette, West Virginia *Tribune*, possibly a rehashing of language from a Union Carbide press release, furnished the gist of the project's developmentalist narrative:

> Like a tale from the story of Aladdin's lamp, boring of the tunnel has enriched the Union Carbide company with untold wealth. In the process of removing the rock, the workers came across a vast deposit of silica sandstone which assays 99.44 percent pure. It is as fine a grade of sandstone and especially adaptable for steel and glass work, as has been found in the world.[15]

This quasi-magical account of the discovery of mineral wealth casts the finding of silica during the process of drilling the tunnel as a happy accident. Framed through the extractivist gaze, the article focuses on the purity of the silica the operation discovered and its suitability as a raw material for industrial production, and glosses quickly over the workers in the tunnel, who, in 'removing the rock', were exposed—through negligence or outright disregard—to the silica dust that would gather in their lungs, killing many of them. To some extent, the poem echoes the newspaper account as it presents

silica as the very stuff of industrialised modernity, the *sine qua non* of its transformation of landscape into *matériel*: 'Copper contains it, we find it in limestone, / sand quarries, sandstone, potteries, foundries, / granite, abrasives, blasting; many kinds of grinding, / plate, mining, and glass'.[16] Moving from silica's natural occurrence to its use in various forms of industry, these lines deftly suggest a transition from raw material, through its processing, to finished product. Much of the space of the poem will be devoted to the crucial problem of working against such processes of reification to render legible (and visible) the resource logics inherent within industrialised modernity—and their human and environmental costs.

Testimony by Philippa Allen, a social worker who visited Gauley Bridge in 1934 and testified before the US House subcommittee assembled to investigate the exploitation of workers at Gauley Bridge, provides much of poem's background on the operation. Allen was an important figure in bringing the situation to light as it was her series of editorials, published in *New Masses* in early 1935, under the pseudonym Bernard Allen, that brought the tragedy to national attention.[17] (The *New Masses* editorials were quite probably Rukeyser's initial source of information on the topic as well.) In both the editorials and her testimony reproduced in the poem, Allen emphasises the collusions between Union Carbide and its subsidiaries and governmental organisations, particularly at the state level, in bringing about and covering up the deaths of workers employed to work on the tunnel. Allen's statement thus confirms other accounts of the operation in its assertion that the tunnel was originally planned as part of a hydroelectric project approved by the West Virginia state legislature to serve as a public utility, and that the power generated was eventually sold back to the company itself for use in a newly constructed metallurgical plant at a nearby site.[18] The following lines of the poem appropriate Allen's testimony before the congressional subcommittee as they assume a question-and-answer format:

> —They were developing the power. What I am trying to
> get at, Miss Allen, is, did they use this silica from the
> tunnel; did they afterward sell it and use it in
> commerce?
> —They used it in the processing of steel.
> SiO2 SiO2
> The richest deposit.
> Shipped on the C & O down to Alloy.
> It was so pure that
> SiO2
> they used it without refining.[19]

The poem draws upon this extrapoetic material as it lineates Allen's testimony, recontextualising her language within both the poem itself and the material history it inscribes. Through its repetition, the chemical formula

for silicon dioxide—SiO_2—becomes a cipher for the compound itself, echoing through Allen's testimony and representing a materiality at once so pure and so devastating that it will become a shaping force of modernity as the poem imagines it.

In the poem, the natural landscape thus becomes a sort of Pandora's box, a repository for forces that, once released, cannot be contained. In three of the poem's central sections, 'Alloy', 'Power', and 'The Dam', the raging force contained within the landscape gives way to a sort of industrial sublime suggested by the marvel of modern engineering that finally emerges. Importantly, the poem remains ambivalent about both modernity at large and the resources that enable it, as it enacts what I have been calling a resource poetics to reveal the material substrate of a thoroughly modern, engineered, and managed landscape whose powerful natural abundance is marshalled through human ingenuity.[20] 'Power' in its many valences is a concept that echoes throughout Rukeyser's poem, as the 'natural' power of the landscape becomes linked materially and thematically to the electrical power produced by damming and redirecting the New River. In an extended sense, 'power' also inheres in the poem's many documented instances of brute human force and the more abstract, but no less coercive, exercise of corporate and governmental power, demonstrating, in the phrasing of Bellamy et al., 'the inextricability of energy as power from social and political power',[21] as well as the grassroots efforts on the part of afflicted individuals and communities to counteract abuses of power.

The section of the poem titled 'The Dam' continues the poem's meditation on power: 'All power is saved, having no end', one line reads.[22] An invocation of the law of the conservation of energy, which maintains that energy can be neither created nor destroyed but merely changes form, this line suggests the connections between the multiple valences of power at work in the poem.[23] The force generated by the rushing water is harnessed through human labour as

> Many-spanned, lighted, the crest leans under
> concrete arches and the channeled hills,
> turns in the gorge toward its release;
> kinetic and controlled, the sluice
> urging the hollow, the thunder,
> the major climax
> energy
> total and open watercourse
> praising the spillway, fiery glaze,
> crackle of light, cleanest velocity
> flooding, the moulded force.[24]

Human ingenuity harnesses the kinetic energy of moving water, guiding it toward the sexualised 'climax' that occurs when its stored potential is

actualised and it becomes electrical energy. In its effort to instantiate the processes it invokes, however, the poem goes beyond its poetic description of this transformation to inscribe the material transformation by which it occurs, framing this operation in terms of

> Cylinders; kilowatts; capacities.
> Continuity: $\Sigma Q = 0$
> Equations for falling water. The streaming motion.
> The balance-sheet of energy that flows
> passing along its infinite barrier.[25]

Here the poem reproduces the continuity equation $\Sigma Q = 0$ as a mathematical expression of the law of the conservation of energy, echoing its earlier invocation of this law. Like the poem itself, the equation represents an epistemology that attempts to approximate the abstract forces lurking within the landscape, which are extracted and refined, and rendered into commodities, as suggested by the 'balance-sheet'. As yet another means of registering the materiality the poem inscribes, the stock report the reader encounters toward the end of the section titled 'The Dam' assumes an ironic and even morbid dimension within the poem's context of loss and devastation:[26] (Figure 1)

The report shows stocks climbing—from 61-and-a-quarter points to 64-and-one-half points—and thus corroborates the poem's previous claim that 'stocks went up', confirming financial accumulation as the final endpoint.[27] Whereas the instrumentalizing logic of resource extraction seeks to reduce the power of the river to quantifiable—and profitable—numbers on a balance sheet, the text aims to place such positivistic projects into a broader context as a means of illuminating the processes through which properties of nature are transformed through human intervention into various forms of power.

Like the landscape itself, the labouring bodies upon which the resource logic of extractivism depends are written off as collateral. In the case of Gauley Tunnel, workers' exposure to raw silica, a compound present in abundance in the sandstone hills of West Virginia, had a direct result in bringing about an impossible-to-verify number of cases of acute silicosis, an occupational condition that attained widespread recognition only in the wake of the events at Gauley Bridge and the congressional investigation

High	Low	Stock and Dividend in Dollars	Open	High	Low	Last	Net Chge.	Closing Bid	Ask	Sales
111	61 ¼	Union Carbide (3.20) …	67 ¼	69 ½	67 ¼	69 ½	+3	69 ¼	69 ½	3,400

Figure 1. Stock report reproduced in *The Book of the Dead*.

that followed.[28] All the more damning in the Gauley Bridge case was the allegation that the corporation had known of the risks involved in its operation, which were multiplied through its practice of drilling the silica dry; its insistence on sending workers back into the tunnel immediately after a blast had been set off, rather than allowing the dust to settle; and the lack of protective equipment such as respirators it provided its workers. The assumption that the latter were viewed as expendable is confirmed by many aspects of their treatment: the corporation sent its scouts throughout the South with tales of abundant work in West Virginia, which, with the mass unemployment of the early years of the Depression, were reason enough for many migrant African American laborers to decamp for Gauley Bridge, where they were met with deplorable living conditions, racial violence, coerced labour, and wages that declined from fifty cents per hour in 1930 to half that rate within two years' time.[29] When they began sickening and dying *en masse*, company doctors diagnosed them with a range of ailments including 'tunnelitis', pleurisy, tuberculosis, and pneumonia, the latter attributed to their profligate lifestyles. To preclude investigation, corpses were buried quickly by a company-employed undertaker named Handley White, who interred them in mass graves in a cornfield on land his family owned. The poem documents these abuses in abundance: 'H. C. White, Funeral Services […] / tells about Negroes who got wet at work, shot craps, drank and took cold, pneumonia, died'.[30] These workers, according to White's congressional testimony, reproduced in the poem, were 'Buried, five at a time, / pine boxes, Rinehart & Dennis paid him $55 / a head for burying these men in plain pine boxes'.[31]

In the poem, the surround becomes a toxic force as its particles are breathed into the lungs, leading to silicosis. As such, the poem participates in a poetic tradition Margaret Ronda describes as 'materializations of uncanny atmospheres'.[32] In its acute form, silicosis forms scar tissue in the lungs, choking off oxygen and eventually suffocating the victim. The disease can kill within a matter of months or linger for years, depending on its severity. Rukeyser's poem reveals the status of silicosis as an accelerated form of the attritional violence-by-degrees Rob Nixon labels 'slow violence', in which the effects of exposure to toxic environments accrete within the bodies of those exposed, and remain invisible on the surface.[33] The poem works against this invisibility as it renders bodies legible as sites of extraction in their own right. Shirley Jones, the seventeen year-old son of a local, poor-white mining family whose uncle, father, and brothers would also become victims, tells his mother to have his body opened when he dies:

'Mother, when I die,
I want you to have them open me up and
see if that dust killed me.

Try to get compensation,
you will not have any way of making your living
when we are gone,
and the rest are going too.'[34]

For all its pathos and its glorification of Emma Jones as a mother figure, this section of the poem is also one of the key moments in the text when an invisible threat—or a threat visible only in the form of a ubiquitous white dust—takes on the capacity to gain visibility as the body, a site of labour-induced suffering, is opened up, becoming a text to be read.[35] This textualization of the working-class body assumes several guises within the poem, perhaps most explicitly in the section in which we encounter Mearl Blankenship, another worker suffering with silicosis:

He stood against the rock
facing the river
grey river grey face
the rock mottled behind him
like X-ray plate enlarged
diffuse and stony[36]

In its ashen pallor, Blankenship's face mirrors the grey of the river, while his body seems almost to merge with the landscape behind him as both body and landscape conceal more than they reveal. The rock before which Blankenship stands recalls an x-ray of a diseased lung, suggesting in turn that the spongy living tissue of his lungs is indeed turning to stone. The trope of the x-ray stands for a bringing-to-light of what lies buried beneath the surface as the merging of body and landscape implies their similar makeup: not only is the body a highly complex organic site in which the same elements and compounds found in nature are also present in bone and living tissue; it is also a kind of living receptacle, capable of being breached on a micro-level by particles of the very materials comprising (and contaminating) its environment, which are suspended in the water table, the food supply, or in this case, the air one breathes.[37] What the poem gives us in its depiction of Blankenship is thus the plundered landscape writ small as colonised body.

2. Nowak's resource poetics and contemporary crisis

Far from being confined to Rukeyser's time, the extractivist practices *The Book of the Dead* exposes and condemns had, if anything, only become amplified by the time the United States (and the world) entered a new economic crisis in 2008 with striking similarities to the Great Depression including reckless speculation in securities, falling asset prices, and enormous levels of income inequality and mass unemployment. Rukeyser is one of Nowak's

acknowledged influences; *Coal Mountain Elementary* shares many obvious thematic similarities with *The Book of the Dead* including its focus on industrial malpractice, the fungibility of working-class bodies, and corporate coverups. In addition, the two poems share structural similarities such as their collaging of textual sources produced as by-products of the disasters they document, a representational strategy I have been referring to throughout in my use of the term 'resource poetics'. Nowak explicitly describes the project as an effort to produce 'labor history with line breaks': 'the documentary poem as subgenre not only of poetry but also of labor history'.[38] In 'Notes toward an Anticapitalist Poetics', his contribution to a 2006 symposium on Adrienne Rich, Nowak provides a litany of global labour uprisings and asks rhetorically, 'Where are the poems in dialogue with these global people's movements? Where are the poems bridging and building transnational social and aesthetic networks or alternative and agitational modes of grammar and syntax, revolutionary poetic critiques of corporate culture (the contemporary complement to Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*)?'.[39] Appearing in 2009, at the height of this more recent capitalist crisis, *Coal Mountain Elementary* is Nowak's own answer to this question. Through its documentation of the shared impacts of extractivism, and coal mining in particular, *Coal Mountain Elementary* elaborates a resource poetics with striking similarities to Rukeyser's as it bridges the gap between the aesthetic and the social, bringing into visibility the linkages connecting the residual vestiges of the US industrial economy of the early twenty-first century to its now fully industrial counterpart in China. Nowak's resource poetics goes a step beyond Rukeyser's as his text dispenses with authorial commentary altogether, relying instead solely on found documents including eyewitness reports of the 2006 Sago disaster, which the poem juxtaposes with lesson plans for children about mining by the American Coal Foundation and news reports from Chinese mining accidents, along with Nowak's own photographs from West Virginia and photographs of Chinese miners by the UK-based photographer Ian Teh.[40] (While I lack sufficient space to comment on it here, *Coal Mountain Elementary*'s ambivalent use of photography is another aspect of this more recent text that recalls *The Book of the Dead*.) In its project of bringing visibility to such forms of contemporary exploitation lying at the very wellspring of the globalised hydrocarbon economy, *Coal Mountain Elementary* exposes the human and environmental effects of neoliberal extractivist practices.

In its reliance on testimony from the Sago disaster, Nowak's text echoes the format of the sections of Rukeyser's text in which she draws on testimony from the congressional hearing. In assembling his own text, Nowak drew on 6,300 pages of testimony by rescue workers and miners involved with the Sago operation from the West Virginia Office of Miners' Health and Safety website. One such extract reads:

> It was just an Excel spreadsheet with one that said—the column on the left was item and 1 through 12—1 through 13, actually, with the first item being the man that was found in the track heading. I forget his name now. And then, you know, the other column was the corresponding name of the individual. An item number, they just had more or less a code.[41]

This erasure of individual identity ('I forget his name now') and subsequent reduction of human lives to codes on a spreadsheet is precisely the text's point: by subjecting human lives to cost-benefit analysis, the coal industry reduces individuals to mere statistics as labouring bodies become expendable elements in the extraction process. *Coal Mountain Elementary*'s ironic pedagogy undermines the logic of this extractivist gaze through its incorporation of lesson plans for students from the website of the American Coal Foundation, an industry lobbying organisation that masquerades as a non-profit. 'What do you think are some of the costs associated with mining coal?' a discussion question, isolated on its own page, asks rhetorically.[42] Many of the lesson plans on which the text draws are framed in terms of *cost*, an obvious effort to get students to think like a mining company that the text uses to great rhetorical effect. In one exercise that can only appear in the context as deeply ironic, for instance, the students are asked to engage in a 'cookie mining' exercise, in which they are told to 'mine' the chocolate chips from cookies with the tools provided: toothpicks and paperclips. Students are encouraged to keep their labour costs at a minimum by mining quickly, and to engage in 'reclamation' by undertaking the obviously impossible task of restoring the site (their cookie) to its original condition. In the end, the students tally their results:

> Have students use
> the Cookie Mining Worksheet
> to calculate
> their profit
> or loss.[43]

Further adding to the irony is the assignment's inability to frame 'loss' in anything but economic terms. ('How accurate is this simulation in illustrating the challenges of making money in the mining industry?' the text will ask at one point.[44]) Yet juxtaposed with the lines cited above, the transcript of a rescuer's testimony from the Sago disaster, which appears on the facing page, renders the idea of 'loss' in all its human significance:

> So we got halfway down there, and Jim—I hear Jim yelling, they're here, they're over here. Get over here, I found them. So I take off on a dead run heading that way. And went on in there, through a curtain there just hanging there and went on in, and there they were, all—all—Jim's working on McCloy, because he's alive, you know, he's—and I go directly to the opposite side of him and start checking for pulse and—you know, any breathing on the guys

> on the right-hand rib. So I'm working my way down checking each one of these guys to make sure, you know—to see if they were alive, you know.[45]

In incorporating language lifted from transcripts from the Sago disaster, the text reproduces the slow revelation of the extent of the loss of life in the mine, from the time when methane gas from a coal seam created an explosion, trapping thirteen miners, to the false hope generated among members of the miners' families by initial reports that the miners were alive, to the final realisation that all but one had died.

Nowak's text incorporates first-person accounts accorded to the West Virginia miners, but switches to a third-person journalistic frame to present the experiences of Chinese workers. Thus if the text's gradually unfurling account of catastrophe in rural West Virginia humanises the victims of the explosion, its interspersed excerpts from news reports of mining accidents in contemporary China have nearly the opposite effect, rendering loss through the sheer aggregation of victims. The imbalance this leads to within the text underscores the notion that while industrial accidents do still occur in the west, much of the risk associated with extractive practices has indeed been outsourced; as one of the accounts cited in the text declares, '*poverty and China's massive appetite for energy are fueling risky and often deadly mining practices*'.[46] This discrepancy, combined with the sheer proliferation of numbers of fatalities in its accounts of the Chinese mining sector, implies that while tragedies like the Sago River disaster do still occur in the contemporary United States, the forms of immiseration they represent have largely been removed to spaces where those untold numbers they affect remain largely anonymous, if not altogether invisible.[47] Taken together, the sections excerpted from journalistic accounts of contemporary Chinese mining disasters emphasise aspects of the 'slow violence' occurring in the Chinese mining sector including the industrially induced toxification the landscape; the peasant origins and frequent displacement of the affected miners; the lack of safety training and oversight at mining operations; the culture of official cover-ups through which the severity of losses is consistently undermined; failed efforts at rescue; and the role assigned to women in mining disasters as grieving wives, sisters and mothers. '*Anxious relatives demanded to be allowed into a coal mine Monday after an explosion killed at least 138 miners and left 11 others missing, adding to a soaring death toll in China's mines despite a safety crackdown*'.[48] By contrast to the sections of the text dealing with the Sago disaster, whose 13 victims are humanised by the text, the Chinese victims appear in the aggregate, as mere numbers: '*More than 6,000 miners died in workplace accidents last year, according to government statistics. Labour rights groups say the figure could be as high as 20,000*'.[49] These shockingly high numbers, in addition to the discrepancy between official statics and actual figures, suggests the expendability of the laborers involved.

3. Conclusion: resource poetics and the histories of extractivist modernity

In Rukeyser's treatment, the catastrophe at Gauley Bridge becomes more than a story of corporate malfeasance; it is the story of modernity as such, as extractivism becomes a trope for the way in which modernisation and the pattern of economic and cultural growth it initiated became predicated on the expendability of rural spaces like Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, and the labouring bodies they drew into their orbit. Seen in retrospect, the project at Gauley Bridge becomes a precursor to today's neoliberal extractive practices as it expropriated public resources to private ends, and human and environmental costs were localised within an already impoverished area while profits were exported elsewhere. Nowak's poem bookends this history of extractivist modernity to suggest that with the deindustrialisation of the west and the subsequent removal of much of the world's 'dirty' resource extraction to spaces outside its scope, the damage wrought in the name of progress has been withdrawn from western view, and thus localised in expendable areas outside the purview of modernity, a process linking rural West Virginia with rural China. As I have been suggesting throughout this essay, the congruencies between these two poetic texts, situated roughly three-quarters of a century apart, should be taken as more than a reflection of the similarities between the situations that produced them. Both *The Book of the Dead* and *Coal Mountain Elementary* adopt a resource poetics that draws on archives produced as side-effects of the crises they document that include newspaper articles, trial transcripts, eyewitness testimonies, stock reports, and other the documents. In doing so, both poems intervene materially into the ongoing processes of extractivist modernity, bringing their deadly effects to visibility—and accountability.

Notes

1. Catherine Venable Moore, introduction to Muriel Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia UP, 2018), p. 3.
2. Rebecca Scott, *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfield* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004), p. 6. Scott maintains that extractivism 'conceptualizes landscape essentially as property, a form of abstract space where the commodity can be cognitively separated from the human community and natural environment. […] These conflicts play out in complex ways on the terrain of gender formations, culturally embedded racial logics, class identity and habitus, and the human relationship to nature' (p. 8).
3. Bob Johnson, *Carbon Nation: Fossil Fuels in the Making of American Culture* (Lawrence: U Press of Kansas, 2014), xxv.
4. Ibid., p. xxvi.

5. See the Introduction to this issue for an extended discussion of visibility, apprehension, and aesthetics in relation to extractivism.
6. The term 'resource aesthetics' was proposed in a 2016 special issue of *Postmodern Culture* (see Brent Ryan Bellamy, Michael O'Driscoll, and Mark Simpson, 'Introduction: Toward a Theory of Resource Aesthetics', *Postmodern Culture*, 26.2 [2016]. doi: 10.1353/pmc.2016.0010). Jennifer Wenzel's afterword claims provocatively that 'a resource logic is also a resource aesthetic', one in which 'the profitable and the beautiful are brought into alignment, envisioned as one and the same' (n. pag.).
7. Ibid., n. pag.
8. 'Ecopoetics' is a term that continues to be debated. Most relevant for my argument here are definitions that situate the term within material histories and practices. See Evelyn Reilly, 'The Grief of Ecopoetics', *Interim*, 29.1-2 (2011), p. 321. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A282513063/LitRC?u=unitroms&sid=LitRC&xid=7ceccb8c. Accessed 9 Jan. 2020; and Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2017), pp.14–15.
9. Historian Ira Katznelson writes that 'the TVA Act offered resource development and economic planning on an immense scale. It authorized the construction of huge power and navigation dams on the Tennessee River to control flooding, advance reforestation of stripped land, and, especially, bring electricity at low cost to a backward region, and it sanctioned building plants the TVA would run to supply area farmers with affordable fertilizer' (*Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* [New York: Norton, 2013], p. 253). For a comprehensive history of the TVA and the PR campaign used to sell it, see Richard Barnes, Howard H. Baker, and Tim Culvahouse, *Tennessee Valley Authority: Design and Persuasion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural P, 2007).
10. Quoted in Tim Culvahouse, Introduction, in Barnes, Baker, and Culvahouse, *Tennessee Valley Authority*, p. 15.
11. Berman's 'Faustian model' of development 'gives top priority to gigantic energy and transportation projects on an international scale. It aims less for immediate profits than for long-range development of productive forces, which it believes will produce the best results for everyone in the end'. This model strives to 'create a historically new synthesis of private and public power, symbolized by the union of Mephistopheles, the private freebooter and predator who executes much of the dirty work, and Faust, the public planner who conceives and directs the work as a whole' (*All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* [London: Verso, 1991], p. 74). Barry M. Katz explicitly describes the TVA as a Faustian project as he writes, '[c]reated by act of Congress in 1933, against the background of the New Deal and the growing threat of war, and over the resistance of much of the local population, the ambitions of the TVA were Faustian both in ideology and engineering' ('Ideology and Engineering in the Tennessee Valley', in Barnes, Baker, and Culvahouse, eds., *Tennessee Valley Authority*, p. 80).
12. Martin Cherniack notes that the New Kanawha Power Company was ostensibly 'chartered to construct public utilities in West Virginia, but no serious attempt was made to pretend that New Kanawha was more than a legal fiction created by the parent company. […] The commission readily licensed the dummy company to develop and produce power for general public sales

and for commercial use. In the company's brief history, however, this power had only one purchaser: Union Carbide. The New Kanawha Power Company was an administrative chimera, combining solitary corporate control with minimal liability. Commissioned to produce hydroelectricity, it did not generate a single watt under its own name; a licensed public utility, its entire bounty was kept in private hands' (*The Hawk's Nest Incident: America's Worst Industrial Disaster* [New Haven, Ct: Yale UP, 1986], p. 11).

13. Cherniack, *The Hawk's Nest Incident*, p. 34.
14. Onur Ilas Ince, *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP), p. 46, qtd. in Wenzel, afterword, *Postmodern Culture*, 26.2 (2016), n. pag.
15. Cherniack, *The Hawk's Nest Incident*, p. 41.
16. Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, introd. Catherine Venable Moore (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia UP, 2018), pp. 110–11.
17. See Bernard (Philippa) Allen, 'Two Thousand Dying on a Job', *New Masses*, 15 Jan. 1935, pp. 18–19, and 'Two Thousand Dying on a Job 2: How the Tunnel Workers Lived', *New Masses*, 22 Jan. 1935, pp. 13–14. Allen's articles were follow-ups to an 8 January 1935 story.
18. See Cherniack, p. 41.
19. Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, p. 67.
20. Differing somewhat from modernist paeans to the conversion of natural forces into electrical power from Henry Adams's earlier ecstatic embrace of the dynamo in *The Education of Henry Adams* to William Carlos Williams's equally celebratory representation of Paterson Falls in his own long poem *Paterson*, which would appear a few years later, these central sections of the poem maintain an ambivalent tone, at once decrying the depredations that occur in extracting power from the landscape, and celebrating the sheer force of the energies such extractive processes unleash.
21. Bellamy, O'Driscoll, and Simpson, 'Introduction: Toward a Theory of Resource Aesthetics', n. pag.
22. Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, p. 104.
23. This thematization of the law of the conservation of energy continues throughout this section of the poem, which ends, 'It changes. It does not die' (*The Book of the Dead*, p. 109). Bryan Duncan notes this trope in the poem when he writes, 'transformation provides the main trope for the sequence in several notable ways. First, water is changed into electricity. […] Net, natural resources, including human lives, are transformed into monetary value: the poems trace the conversion of silica and acute silicosis into the daily stock quotations for Union Carbide as its profits rise along with water behind a dam. […] Finally, historical evidence is transformed into lyrical poetry in the sequence' ('"All Power Is Saved": The Physics of Protest in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*', *Contemporary Literature*, 50.3 [2009], p. 553).
24. Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, p. 105.
25. Ibid., p. 107.
26. Ibid., p. 108.
27. Ibid., p. 107.
28. Estimates regarding the number of deaths that resulted from the project vary widely and will most likely remain a matter of speculation. Cherniack devotes an entire chapter of his study to this question, arriving at the figure of 764 victims of silicosis by the end of 1937, before going on to note that '[a]n

estimated toll of more than seven hundred men, arrived at through a series of necessarily speculative but consistently conservative calculations, may well be too small' (*The Hawk's Nest Incident*, p. 104).

29. For vivid accounts of the racism and deplorable conditions affecting the predominantly African American workforce, see Allen's *New Masses* articles and Cherniack.
30. Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, p. 94.
31. Ibid., p. 95.
32. Margaret Ronda, *Remainders: American Poetry at Nature's End* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2018), p. 58. Such 'materializations' have a long history spanning from Romantic to modernist poetry: 'Blake's images of the "clouded hills" and "dark satanic mills", Wordsworth's portraits of "smokeless air" and "common wind", Eliot's "yellow fog", and even Rukeyser's clouds of silica dust in *The Book of the Dead*. In all of these cases, the ambient surround serves both as an index of immanent environmental experience and as an omen of larger change on the horizon' (ibid.).
33. For Nixon, 'slow violence' is 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.' It is thus 'a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales' (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* [Boston: Harvard UP, 2013], p. 2). One of the fundamental problems slow violence poses is one of visibility, in which its lack of instantaneous visible effect ensures that it will inevitably be overshadowed in commercial media by more spectacular forms of calamity.
34. Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, p. 81.
35. Jones's death certificate notes that his body was indeed opened up in an autopsy following his death at eighteen in June 1932. The certificate notes his cause of death as silicosis, and confirms that the 'pathology' was 'found'. (See https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57ad29ac893fc0d13469f9e9/t/57bb543bebbd1a99217b054d/1471894588868/Jones_Shirley.pdf).
36. Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*, p. 78.
37. David Kadlec contextualizes historically Rukeyser's use of x-ray technology in the poem: '[s]erving a range of institutional purposes, medical and conventional photographic equipment carried vexed social and political overtones in the late 1930s. Rukeyser portrayed the X-ray camera as a penetrating medium that could retrieve emancipatory truths from Gauley tunnel' ('X-Ray Testimonials in Muriel Rukeyser', *Modernism/Modernity*, 5.1 [1998], p. 27).
38. Philip Metres and Mark Nowak, 'Poetry as Social Practice in the First Person Plural: A Dialogue on Documentary Poetics', *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12.1 (2010), p. 11.
39. Mark Nowak, 'Notes toward an Anticapitalist Poetics', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 82.2 (2006), p. 239.
40. Lynn Keller frames the issues at stake in Nowak's text as she argues against the idea 'that Nowak has simply provided a crudely ironic, easy contrast in setting educational materials designed by a pro-coal organization beside evidence of the terrible danger coal mining poses to miners, their families and communities, and the natural environments where mines are situated. The juxtaposed

materials', she continues, 'speak to each other in a variety of ways so that he creates something this is clear in its politics yet also rewardingly complex' (*Recomposing Ecopoetics*, p. 223).

41. Mark Nowak, *Coal Mountain Elementary* (Minneapolis: Coffee House P, 2009), p. 103.
42. Ibid., p. 87.
43. Ibid., p. 118.
44. Ibid., p. 122.
45. Ibid., p. 119.
46. Ibid., p. 126; italics in the original.
47. Jill Magi is justifiably critical of aspects of *Coal Mountain Elementary* including its lack of authorial commentary, the fact that Asian workers are pictured while American workers are unpictured, and especially its differential treatment of voice: 'the West Virginia miners are known through their court testimonies and Chinese workers' texts are known from news stories about them' ('Poetry in Light of Documentary', *Chicago Review*, 59.1–2 [2014–15], p. 271). I would argue, however, that this discrepancy serves to underscore the differences between the ways in which we encounter and respond to tragedies involving western versus non-western subjects.
48. Nowak, *Coal Mountain Elementary*, p. 73; italics in the original.
49. Ibid., p. 108; italics in the original.

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