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How Documentary Poetry Imagines

Seunghyun Shin

University at Albany, State University of New York

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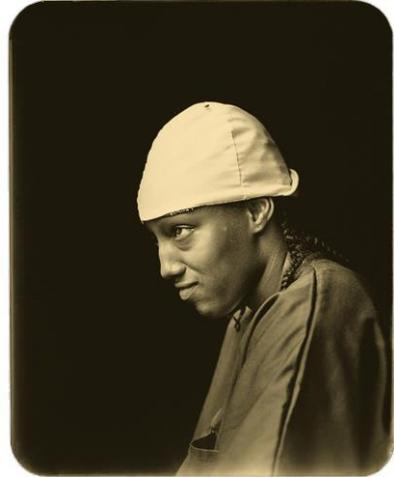
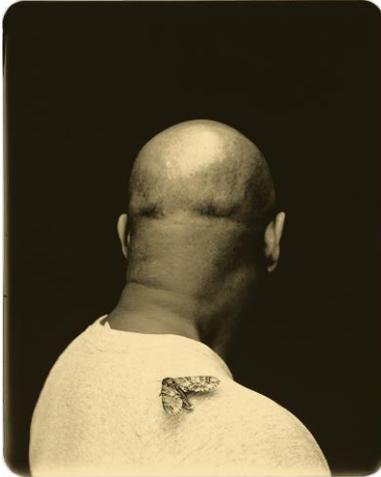
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How Documentary Poetry Imagines



Photographs by *Deborah Luster*

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Seunghyun Shin

Research Advisor: Dr. Eric Keenaghan
Second Reader: Dr. Charles Shepherdson

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Abstract

As we face the end of the post-modern world at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the preceding decades of postmodernity can be seen to have led to a widespread underappreciation of reading and writing poetry in general. If we want to say that poetry is necessary in the world, how should literary scholars and writers defend its value? The value of reading and writing poetry owes to its socio-political efficacy.

This research will highlight how poetry can be political through exploring the works of three documentary poets: Muriel Rukeyser, C.D. Wright, and Claudia Rankine. The goal is to refute the popular denunciation of documentary poetry that it is simply the mimesis of the real world. This common rejection is derived from a reductive view of its characteristic reproduction of documents or statements not produced by the poet. Drawing upon the idea of the imagination that William Carlos Williams conceptualizes in *Spring and All* and his documentary poetics in *Paterson*, this thesis will argue that the three poets' works are located in the tradition of his poetics. Exploring that tradition, this thesis will underline how poetry can be political and how it can collaborate with other media. Through showing how documents and lyrics provide poetic sources of imagination while collaborating with photography and film, this research highlights the socio-political impacts that documentary poetry has.

Acknowledgements

To discuss how poetry could survive in this poetry-phobic era, I dedicated myself to finishing this project. With deepest gratitude, I would like to thank Professor Eric Keenaghan. Without his expert guidance and patience, this thesis would not have been possible. I also appreciate the unwavering supports from two other faculty members in the department: Professor Charles Shepherdson and Professor Paul Stasi. Finally, I want to recognize three doctoral students who supported me finishing this thesis: James Searle, Joseph Henderson and Janna Urschel.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction. How Documentary Poetry Imagines.....	5
Chapter I. From Stenotype to Photo Narrative: Poetic Politics in Muriel Rukeyser's <i>The Book of the Dead</i>	11
Chapter II. Abstraction, True Words, and One Untranslatable Song: C.D. Wright and Documentary Poetry.....	29
Chapter III. Racial Imaginary, Documentary, and Video Poetry: Claudia Rankine, <i>Citizen</i> , and <i>Situation</i> Videos.....	44
Conclusion.....	54
Works Cited.....	56

How Documentary Poetry Imagines

Last year, I went to SUNY Cobleskill to present about Muriel Rukeyser and C.D. Wright. After the presentation, one of the science professors in the audience asked me “Why should we study poetry?” I answered, “Poetry is a fundamental way of thinking and expressing oneself.” My answer might have seemed superficial to him but I asked myself after that conference: “What happens to readers when they read poetry?” I believe answering this question will guide us as we think about the reasons for writing and reading poetry.

When we read a poem, we naturally imagine the images. Poets choose specific words to describe poetic worlds and readers then imagine those worlds in their minds without any direct input from their senses. That is to say, they know the poetic worlds are distinct from the real world. Symbolism is a typical example of the imaginative methods in poetry. This principle of imagination was a general pursuit of poets who were “literalists of the imagination” and claimed that poetry should make readers travel to “imaginary gardens” (Moore, “Poetry”). However, those poets do not fully explain why the imagination is important to readers.

In *Spring and All*, William Carlos Williams, who is surprisingly underrated as a Modernist poet, criticizes this trend of poetry. According to his discourse, such poetry inevitably is steeped in “incomprehensibility” and the words that are used to describe the poetic worlds result in the “evocation” of any “insignificant image” (21; 20). Imagining such images makes it difficult for readers to comprehend “the purpose of composition” (Williams 21). From this viewpoint, the compositions of poets are “aristocratic” since they cannot correspond to the “multiformity” of readers, and the insignificant images separate readers from the real world (Williams 21). For Williams, some compositions by poets whom he calls “moderns,” such as Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens, could be “death of poetry” (21; 2).

Then what is poetry for Williams if it is not a symbolic form? He calls much Modernist poetry “antipoetry” (2). In lieu of the “strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms” of the antipoetry that are “designed to separate” readers from reality, Williams pursues a language to “be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognisant of the whole—aware—civilized” (22). To do so, he declares that his compositions exclude the symbolism that poets have traditionally deployed in their compositions. For Williams, plain language is more comprehensible and universal. He writes:

In the composition, the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality — Taught by the largeness of his imagination to feel every form which he sees moving within himself, he must prove the truth of this by expression. (27)

In other words, he claims that the composition should present what readers can comprehend so that they can see how the imagination resonates with their own life and real world. Indeed, the universality of a poet’s writing in his composition is only universal when it is comprehensible. The exclusion of “crude symbolism” and the pursuit instead of direct comprehensibility indicate Williams’s aim to achieve such universality in his poetry.

From this viewpoint, Williams’s poetics could be seen as an expansion of readers’ imagination from a personal form to a universal one. By writing the imagination in poetry, a poet releases himself from “observing things for the purpose of writing them down later” and engages “the free world” (Williams 50). When the imagination is written in plain language, it achieves universality. Readers then can resonate it with their reality, and therefore, the imagination becomes “an actual force” (Williams 49). Williams writes:

Sometimes I speak of imagination as a force, an electricity or a medium, a place. It is immaterial which: for whether it is the condition of a place or a dynamization its effect

is the same: to free the world of fact from the impositions of “art” and to liberate the man to act in whatever direction his disposition leads. (92)

So once it gains universality, the imagination is not a plaything but instead a certain power that gives readers a mean to achieve a new level of understanding the real world. Then they can liberate themselves to act with a new disposition toward reality. This explanation implies that the imagination relates to every sphere of the world, and can be used for one to understand that world in a new way. The only realism in poetry is, therefore, the imaginative realism that the readers can universally assign while reading.

In the early 1930s, Williams had not “abandoned his modernist belief in the supremacy of the word, in seeing the poem as an object” (Cohen 144). According to a letter he sent to Kay Boyle:

The occasional pushing notion that the form of poetry (as that of any art) is social in character. Such an opinion is purest superficiality. The form of poetry is that of language. It is related to all art first, then to certain essential characteristics of language, to words ... Poetry is related to poetry, not to social statutes. (*Selected Letters* 130-31)

But as national politics shifted more to the radical Left during the Great Depression, he became more involved in leftist literary politics, as many as other writers of the 1930s also had. His poetics changed as his politics changed. In addition, his politics were influenced by his profession. As his profession was medicine, he “witnessed the privations of his working-class patients” (Cohen 144). Influenced by his fellow writers and his patients, his previous indifference to socio-political issues changed because of political changes. The use of plain language and the pursuit of universality became crucial for Williams’s simplified poetics of producing poems that were comprehensible to the majority of the proletariat.

The documentary poetics that he develops in one of his later works, *Paterson*, exemplify this newly politicized imagination and the realism of his poetry. Williams draws

the attention of the readers to the mind: “Rigor of beauty is the quest. But how will you find beauty when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?” (*Paterson* 3). This statement implies that his poem’s quest is to find beauty, and the protagonist of the poem struggles to interpret the Falls of the Passaic River and study of American language. The protagonist, Paterson, is described as a city, a doctor, a poet, and a young man. In the middle of the narrative about this figure, Williams incorporates diverse and prosaic materials written in plain languages such as historical documents, newspapers, geological surveys, literary texts, and personal letters. By reproducing these materials, *Paterson* demonstrates not only a lyric form that criticizes Modernist symbolism but also “the resemblance between the mind of modern man and the city” through descriptions of the protagonist (Beach 109).

Because the term “documentary poetry” indicates a poem that “contains quotations from or reproductions of documents or statements not produced by the poet and relates historical narratives, whether macro or micro, human or natural,” Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos* and Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* are sometimes considered as its models (Harrington, “Docupoetry and archive desire”). However, the documentary actually has four tendencies: “(1) to record, reveal, or preserve, (2) to persuade or promote, (3) to analyze or interrogate, (4) to express” (Renov 21). Contrary to the previously mentioned two works which focus more on the first and the fourth tendencies, *Paterson* exemplifies all four tendencies. While readers imagine when they read lyrics of Williams and the documents that he reproduces, the imagination is equivalent to a conversation between readers and the author. At this point, they imagine the resemblance between a modern man in the poem and the city that Williams describes.

So it is clear that Williams’s plain language is more comprehensible to multiple readers and so assigns universality to the imagination. The documentary poetics of *Paterson* consist of stenography and lyrics based on the plain language that he emphasizes. As William

claims that readers should attain a universal imagination, the very idea of universality implies that the conversation between readers and the poem shows the socio-political dimensions of the imagination. As Williams became more involved in the Left, his literary politics were also more engaged. According to Paul Mariani, Williams reviewed *U.S. 1* of Muriel Rukeyser—the leftist intellectual in the 1930s whose *The Book of the Dead* I will discuss in the first chapter—and notes her documentary use of various materials, such as X-rays and testimonies. He was impressed by her documentary innovations and this inspired him to reproduce various materials in *Paterson*, although unlike *U.S. 1*, his poem was not written only for a political purpose.

In the two chapters following the first chapter, I will discuss how a documentary poetics based on plain language reveal socio-political dimensions of the imagination is bequeathed to the postmodernist world. I will argue that the tradition of documentary poetics that Williams developed in *Paterson* has had an impact on the poetics of two contemporary political poets: C.D. Wright and Claudia Rankine. In the second chapter, we will travel back to the twenty-first century and pay attention to the state prisons of Louisiana where Wright documents the life of the prisoners for her work *One Big Self*. She reveals the malfunctioning prison system, thus problematizing it as a political issue that the contemporary world is indifferent to. In the last chapter, I will introduce how the tradition of documentary poetics is blended with postmodernist digital technology through my reading of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* and its related *Situation* videos.

Exploring how Williams's tradition of poetics and a socio-political dimension of the imagination influenced the contemporary poets will explain the necessity of poetry in our postmodernist world. We are living among the poetry-phobic generations of the twenty-first century, and Williams's discourse on imagination will possibly be a solution they can use to

to understand postmodernist world in a different way so that they will be able to escape the frustration they feel about the value of reading poetry.

From Stenography to Photo-Narrative: Poetic Politics in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*

In the mid-1930s, monochrome photographs gained cultural prominence in various journalistic spheres. These spheres included: radical organizations such as Photo League or the Workers Film; the governmental agencies that responded to the Great Depression such as the Farm Security Administration whose photographic file became a popular source for the journalists of the time and drew numerous people to an exhibition in 1938; and the magazines including *Life*, *Look*, and *Fortune* that published photographs to feature the Resettlement Administration which reported the effects of the economic crisis in 1936. The reports of these magazines were “told in pictures, organized so that the communication of ideas and emotions became most effective” (Stange 81).

This emergence of photography had an impact on literature. Michael North writes, “many of the most radical formal experiments of the twentieth century could be traced back to the new association of word and image suggested by the photograph” (12). Previously, writing had “legitimacy” for being “a representational medium,” but the fact that the camera was a machine that guaranteed the “authenticity” of the photographs (Parks 151). This authenticity and visual standard challenged writing’s ability to capture the real world.

Muriel Rukeyser, who as a poet surprisingly remains underappreciated by many scholars of American literature and cultural studies, was also interested in photography as a rising medium. Although there is not much evidence to prove that she preferred a specific kind of photography, she did experiment by combining writing and photography: in *The Life of Poetry*, she writes “From the use of writing with paintings to its use with series of photographs is a larger step than it would appear” (138). Then the question is: what made Rukeyser take the “larger step” and what was her plan? In the foreword to *The Life of Poetry*, she states:

I have tried to track down the resistances to poetry, with every kind of “boredom” and “impatience,” the name-calling which says that poetry is “intellectual and obscure and confused and sexually suspect.” How much of this is true, and how much can be traced to the corruption of consciousness? We can see what these attitudes mean, in impoverishment of the imagination, to audience and to artist, both of whom of course are deeply affected (x-i).

She claims that the negative perception about poetry at that time resulted in a lack of imagination in the world. What kept the general audience away from poetry was the audience’s belief that poetry is a scholarly subject: for the general public, poetry was esoteric and only so it was believed intellectuals could understand it. In addition, the rise of photography deepened this public underappreciation. Therefore, a collaboration between writing and photography was a part of the process of defending her poetry from such alienation and producing more accessible poetic sources for an audience.

To do so, she paid attention to the fact that both writing and photography are documentary technologies. Originally, documentary genre promotes an authenticity through the image-making practices and reportage based on them. So Rukeyser intertwined them as a narrative in her poem *The Book of the Dead*. As a film critic who was interested in image-making practices, she was not only intimately connected with organizations such as Photo League and Frontier Films but also had built professional relationships with photographers—Nancy Naumburg and Berenice Abbott—and other contemporary documentary filmmakers. Her intimacy with visual media led Rukeyser to collaborate with Naumburg while producing the documents for writing *The Book of the Dead*.

Unfortunately the photographs that Naumburg took are currently lost; but the poem itself still uses the image of camera as a documentary device. *The Book of the Dead* concerns the aftermath of the Hawk’s Nest tunnel tragedy, one of the worst industrial disasters of the

1930s, and it consists of the testimonies of social workers about it. The use of these testimonies imply that Rukeyser took an active interest in using photography as the documentary technology that “furnish evidence”: the eye of the camera is a device that confirms the authenticity of the testimonies (Sontag 5). This insight—that the authenticity of the camera assures the objectivity of the evidence that it captures—corresponds to Susan Sontag’s discourse in *On Photography*: a photograph, a captured reality in the eye of camera “seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects” (Sontag 6). For Rukeyser, the eye of the camera is another form of vision that can accurately capture visible reality. In the first poem, “The Road,” Rukeyser emphasizes the visible reality that Naumburg’s camera captures. She writes:

Now the photographer unpacks camera and case,
 surveying the deep country, follows discovery
 viewing on groundglass an inverted image. (10)

Her use of metaphor in this stanza implies that the eye of the camera reflects an image which is different from the inverted image on its lens that we see through our eyes. She simultaneously asserts what is the visible to our own eyes is not always accurate and that we unconsciously see only what we want: the reason for our inaccurate sight may include our political views or any of our concerns and interests. That is to say, she emphasizes how the documentary aspect of photography can transfer visual reality without any bias. Then she promotes the camera as a primary instrument of gathering evidence as well as the armament to defend poetry in “The Book of the Dead”: “Defense is sight; widen the lens and see” (71).

Therefore, Rukeyser uses the eye of the camera as a vision that gathers evidence for documentary writing. That is to say, the camera assigns the credibility to her evidentiary stenography in the poem; the stenography based on the eye of the camera is, therefore, photographic. Because photography provides its viewers with “an imaginary possession of a

past that is unreal,” the stenographic documentary in *The Book of the Dead* gives an opportunity to imagine a past issue that is unreal to readers who might not have even heard of the Hawks Nest tunnel tragedy (Sontag 9). The testimonies in the poem therefore evoke the imagination of her readers to understand the tragedy in a political perspective. When they imagine, they identify themselves with the social workers who were sacrificed due to silicosis in the construction sites of the Hawk’s Nest tunnel. Rukeyser explains how this imagination operates in her poetry. Since she asserts that poetry must include “the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience,” her poetry leads readers to identify with the poet and the poem, implying that the poem is an imaginative “meeting-place” where the visual or emotional practice of poet and readers meet (Rukeyser 175; xi). In this process, readers have a sense of experiencing what the documentarian experienced before, and it “moves” them to take action against the reported socio-political issues (Rothstein 34). According to Rukeyser, there is a creative exchange between the readers and the poem in this imaginative process.

She writes:

This is confession as a means to understanding, as testimony to the truths of experience as they become form and ourselves. The type of this is the poem; in which the poet, intellectually giving form to emotional and imaginative experience, with the music and history of a lifetime behind the work, offers a total response. And the witness receives the work, and offers a total response, in a most human communication. Such action ... is creation (212-13).

Her intention is to describe readers as witnesses. It involves the “act of giving evidence” and suggests the “revelatory element to documentary in its exposure of social realities” (175; Gander 210). The “giving” of “evidence” implies a conversation between the poet and the readers. Rukeyser extends the responsibility of the poet to a consideration of the reaction of the readers, attempting to combine the document and the subjective reaction into human

communication. The “climate of excitement and revelation” that surrounds the reader as the “witness” indicates the source of imagination that documentary poetry provides to her (Rukeyser 175). For the speakers who produce testimonies, their speaking is “being done of the self”; and by reading the testimonies in the poem, the imagination enables readers to discover a personal, social, and political identity for them, seen from a new perspective (Rukeyser 175).

In other words, Rukeyser’s engagement with documentary technologies combines stenography and photography into a new form of political documentary poetry which documents individualized data with the eye of the camera and duplicates it with the typewriter simultaneously. This combination is how Rukeyser combined “the use of writing” with photography. Through the imagination, she compels her readers to discover the leftist discourses in her poem: feminism, egalitarianism, and anti-capitalism. I will call this specific narrative of documentary that Rukeyser develops “photo-narrative.” Marsha Bryant claims that using cameras “figuratively” in writing enables the writer to seek to establish “contact across class and national boundaries” (172). Rukeyser’s poetry demonstrates such contact beyond these boundaries:

There are the false barriers: but they are false. If we believe in the unity and multiplicity of the world, if we believe the unity and multiplicity of man, then we believe too in the unity and multiplicity of imagination. And we will speak across the barriers, many to many. The great ideas are always emerging, to be available to all men and women. And one hope of our lives is the communication of these truths (213).

In this sense, she challenged the popular aesthetics of the leftist documentarians of the 1930s which she framed as the “trap of the documentary” that emphasizes the usage of real names and the same repertoires to achieve authenticity (Kaufman 597). In *The Book of the Dead*, criticizing public innocence, criticizing the social structure, and portraying women as a

source of power through writing poetry are all ways of making a critique of other leftist documentaries. Against the mischaracterization of *The Book of the Dead* as a poem that did not satisfy the aesthetic criteria of its readers because it was either too documentary for poetry or overly poetic in its treatment of historical actualities, I argue that the poem is a paragon of the political text that claims the importance of human communication and imagination. It exemplifies the combination of the seemingly incommensurable modes of documentary and lyric in poetry: the subjective mode of lyric and the evidentiary mode of the photo-narrative documentary. Because of the latter, Rukeyser's poem resonates with the imagination of readers as more credible, and thus suggests the necessity of relating the creative writing of poetry to the scientific writing of documents. This combination explains her statement in *U.S. I*: "poetry can extend the document" (Kaufman 606). Her poetry extends the document to be a part of a political text that underlines the importance of the imagination and human communication, producing a testament to the liberating power of self-expression and how readers gain the consciousness about the marginalized identities through poetry.

In the third poem, "Statement: Philippa Allen," Rukeyser uses an excerpt of the testimony of Philippa Allen. Allen was a social worker who became familiar with the cases of workers assigned to the construction of Gauley Bridge. She was summoned to testify what made other workers have silicosis. Her testimony is the first voice that Rukeyser reproduces in *The Book of the Dead* to speak about the disaster, and so her voice plays a role of introducing the tragedy to the readers. Allen speaks:

During the summer of 1934, when I was doing social work
down there, I first heard of what we were pleased to call the
Gauley tunnel tragedy, which involved about 2,000 men. (Rukeyser 13)

When she is asked whether she personally met the other workers or not, she says:

I have talked to people; yes.

According to estimates of contractors

2,000 men were

employed there

period, about 2 years

drilling, 3.75 miles of tunnel.

To divert water (from New River)

To a hydroelectric plant (at Gauley Junction)

The rock through which they were boring was of a high

silica content (Rukeyser 13)

Allen uses statistical information and confirms her personal relationship to the other workers, emphasizing the credibility of her testimony. In this stenographic document, Rukeyser gives the authority to Allen's voice as that of one of the workers who witnessed and experienced the tragedy. This empirical testimony is an unfamiliar story to the readers, though Rukeyser forces her readers to imagine to overcome the unfamiliarity of Allen's interview and the issue that she introduces in her statements. At the end of the poem, the readers discover that her testimony is literally incomplete:

There are many points that I should like to develop

later, but I shall try to give you a general history of

this condition first.... (Rukeyser 15)

This formal choice is an effective contrast to the other choices such as the multiple voices in another poem "The Doctors." Although Allen's verbal testimony might not have been interrupted while she was speaking, this discontinuity clearly forces the readers to imagine more about the issue. That is to say, this incomplete narration, which is intentionally edited by Rukeyser, is equivalent to turning off the camera while recording. This absence compels

readers to be imaginative about Allen's identity as a social worker. At this point, Rukeyser denies her readers the ability to be enlightened about the "general history" of the condition. This indicates that there have been such conditions in the construction sites for a while and the imagination arouses readers' consciousness on the inequality of the class structure of the society since the eye of the camera illuminates workers, who are a part of the marginalized class, with a social worker's point of view.

Rukeyser approaches this social inequality with a leftist view that criticizes the public's innocence. What she recognized when she went to Spain was "a world of constriction and fear, a materialist world that exposed the American danger, in materialism, to be mystical about material values" (206). She believed that there are other "values" that Americans were oblivious to because of the "mystical" belief about materialism, and one of those beliefs was about the supposed equality in social structure and the human rights of the people in the lower classes. In the fourteenth poem "Arthur Peyton," Peyton, the construction worker she illuminates in this poem, receives his paycheck with the mail and Rukeyser provides his monologue. He says:

I had a letter in the mail this morning
 Dear Sir, ... pleasure ... enclosing herewith our check ...
 payable to you, for \$21.59
 ...
 after collecting all we could,
 we find this balance due you. (45)

After Peyton reads the mail, he says:

After collecting
 the dust the failure the engineering corps
 O love consumed eaten away the foreman laughed

...

O love tell the committee that I know:

never repeat you mean to marry me.

In mines, the fans are large (2,000 men unmasked)

before his verdict the doctor asked me How long

I said, Dr. Harless, tell me how long? (45)

Peyton knows that he has silicosis which will eventually kill him so asks his doctor how long he will live. However, readers discover that the firm who recruited him does not pay attention to his working conditions and how they ruined his life and his family but only pays him twenty-one dollars through the mail. Although she does not intervene in the middle of this sentimental illumination, Rukeyser implies the importance of other values than materialism; in this case, love and family are as important as money.

In the nineteenth poem "The Bill," she juxtaposes the hearings of the social workers' committee. In the middle of the hearing, Rukeyser writes:

Of the contracting firm

P. H. Faulconer, Pres.

E. J. Perkins, Vice-Pres.

Have declined to appear.

They have no knowledge of deaths from silicosis.

However, their firm paid claims.

I want to point out that under the statute \$500 or

\$1000, but no more, may be recovered. (64)

For audience, reading this poem is equivalent to listening to the committee. Thus, they face the fact that the firm of the workers tries to indemnify the workers' "deaths" "under the

statute.” This statute demonstrates that materialism of the firm which values the death of the social workers with money and is otherwise indifferent to their suffering.

In the last poem, her lyric corresponds with these photo-narrative documents, asserting the public’s oblivion about the contribution of the social workers. She says,

What one word must never be said?

Dead, and these men fight off our dying,

cough in the theatres of the war.

What two things shall never be seen?

They : what we did. Enemy : what we mean.

This is a nation’s scene and halfway house. (66)

The tone of Rukeyser’s lyric is somewhat furious about the common public reporting by describing the construction workers as treated as “dead.” Thus, her tone implies the kinds of values “we” forget due to materialism. In this metaphoric description of war, “They” refers to the death of the workers due to silicosis and the public’s apathy; the word “Enemy” implies that our enemy is our pretext that we did not “mean” the apathy or their death. That is to say, she criticizes the utter ignorance of the majority of people who are not as marginalized as the workers.

In the seventh poem, “Mearl Blankenship,” Rukeyser guides readers to imagine the workers’ marginalized identity more closely by adducing evidence of how they are alienated. She juxtaposes two voices: the voice of Mearl Blankenship, the construction worker whom she interviews in this poem, and his voice in the letter. After he testifies “I have written a letter / Send it to the city, / maybe to a paper / if it’s all right,” Rukeyser shows the letter to the readers (24). Blankenship wrote:

Dear Sir, my name is Mearl Blankenship.

I have Worked for the rhinehart & Dennis Co

Many days & many nights
 & it was so dusty you couldn't hardly see the lights.
 I helped nip steel for the drills
 & helped lay the track in the tunnel
 & done lots of drilling near the mouth of the tunnell
 ...
 & the boss was Mr. Andrews
 & now he is dead and gone
 But I am still here
 a lingering along. (Rukeyser 25)

The dislocated grammar and spelling errors in the letter imply Blankenship's low level of education, and his identity as a construction worker is exposed to the sympathy of the readers as well as to "strike a pose of superiority, parody, ridicule" (Thurston 68). Rukeyser does not mention if Blankenship wrote the letter to mock the "Sir" nor does she ask him about it, but considering his education and health, he would not have necessarily tried to mock his superior by intentionally making grammatical mistakes while writing the letter. That is to say, Rukeyser's inclusion of this document assigns a political allegory to the document itself that operates through the imagination of the readers.

In that sense, the self-representation of Blankenship's identity in the letter is controversial; so Rukeyser splices it with her description of Blankenship which leads the readers' imagination toward her leftist point of view and broadens the significance of the personal suffering in the letter so that it can resonate with the readers. She writes:

He stood against the rock
 facing the river
 grey river grey face

the rock mottled behind him
 like X-ray plate enlarged
 diffuse and stony
 his face against the stone. (25)

A metonymy of grey face and X-ray plate signifies Rukeyser's montage in this scene. Blankenship stands against the rock facing the river. With the juxtaposition of the rock and his grey face, the metonymy in this stanza overlaps the image of Mount Rushmore that symbolizes the supremacy of America with that of the grey face of Blankenship, and is superimposed over the image of X-ray plate that shows Blankenship's inner thoracic region. Therefore, the three different images—grey face, X-ray plate, and the image of Mount Rushmore—that Rukeyser provides lead her readers to imagine that the worker is represented as an isolated identity in the United States of America.

This narrative structure of the poem, which consists of evidentiary photo-text documents and Rukeyser's lyrics, does not only resonate with readers' imagination about the identity of the workers and the materialism of America. One of the other significant features in Phillipa Allen's testimony is that she is a woman. In the testimony, Allen is not only a narrator who has the authority to produce the document but also a woman as a "source of power," and portraying the identity of women as the latter is another image-making practice that Rukeyser pursues (Goodman 267). Rukeyser was a brave figure before the feminist movement of the 1960s. She was independent enough to marry and divorce her husband—the marriage lasted only six weeks—and in her later work she was daring enough to write about such issues as pregnancy or homosexuality that are sensitive in relation to women. She says, "I learned that I had been brought up as a protected, blindfolded daughter, who might have finally learned some road other than that between school and home, but who knew nothing of people, of New York, or of herself. Everything was to be begun; not only that, but unlearned,

and then at last begun” (205). This life experience led to her feminist discourse in her poems, and she enforces her readers to face this directly through imagining the image of a strong mother while reading Mrs. Jones’s testimony in the eighth poem, “Absalom.” The poem consists of the verbatim testimony of Mrs. Jones who confirms how her son died in the tragedy. She represents a woman who was influenced by the tragedy and who struggles to survive since her husband is not able to work. Mrs. Jones says:

I promised him half if he’d work to get compensation,
but even then he would not do anything.

I went on the road and begged the X-ray money. (Rukeyser 27)

Mrs. Jones draws the attention to the reality that she was the only active family member who is struggling to cure her son’s disease. This reminiscence of her struggle in front of the camera constructs her image as a strong mother who pursues justice: “The case of my son was the first of the line of lawsuits./They sent the lawyers down and the doctors down;/they closed the electric sockets in the camp” (Rukeyser 29).

This active pursuit of justice by a woman is expanded to the defense of workers by in the eleventh poem, “Juanita Tinsley.” Tinsley was a Gauley Bridge social worker who was active in the local defense committee and her testimony is more like the actual defense of the right of workers whereas Mrs. Jones was testifying more about her family. Tinsley says:

Even after the letters, there is work,
sweaters, the food, the shoes
and afternoon’s quick dark

...

Slow letters! I shall be
always—the stranger said
“To live stronger and free.”

I know in America there are songs,

forgetful ballads to be sung,

But at home I see this wrong. (Rukeyser 35)

Tinsley alienates the “stranger” who says “To live stronger and free,” since the issue of silicosis among the workers prevents them from living in such way. “The stranger” is a metaphor that indicates a person who sent mail to her from the city. That is to say, Tinsley deplores the unconsciousness of people in general about the issue of Hawk’s Nest tunnel through the stranger’s comment, “To live stronger and free.” Similarly, the “forgetful ballads” are a sarcastic word implying the unconsciousness of America, and ultimately showing that America, as a nation, does not know about the Hawk’s Nest tunnel tragedy. In other words, her lyrical testimony is her argument that more Americans need to know what has happened in West Virginia. This attitude corresponds to Rukeyser’s political views even though Tinsley does not propose why others do not know about it. Compared to the other testimonies, this direct condemnation is meant to arouse consciousness about the tragedy, and the narrator is represented as a woman who claims the rights of the workers. The statistical testimony of Allen and the sentimentality of Mrs. Jones’s testimony strengthen this lyrical condemnation by Tinsley in the sense of speaking to the public as a woman.

This feminist image-making is expanded in the last poem, “The Book of the Dead.” Rukeyser lyrically intervenes in the imagination about women’s social identity, describing the Carthaginian stone that the readers can see in the museum. This reference expands how readers have imagined women thus far when reading the previous three women’s testimonies:

In the museum life, centuries of ambition

yielded at last a fertilizing image:

the Carthaginian stone meaning a tall woman

carries in her two hands the book and cradled dove,
 on her two thighs, wings folded from the waist
 cross to her feet, a pointed human crown. (Rukeyser 69)

Within this scene, the image of the sculpture is an allusion of the mother goddess, Isis, which originates from the actual Book of the Dead from Egyptian mythology. Isis represents a fertilizing image. However, in the poem, Isis does not hold a child as she is visually represented as a mother; instead, she carries books, alluding to women's role as watchful protectors of civilization, and a cradled dove which symbolizes peace and objects to war. That is to say, Rukeyser claims that the representation of women is not tied to being with her child. She revises the use of the mythology about Isis and envisions a female power that is more active, mobile, and representative of women as powerful figures in history.

Since Rukeyser is using a camera as a device to confirm the evidence in this political discourse, one might argue that film would be a more effective media for showing the political aspect of documentary. From 1938 to 1940, Rukeyser actually tried to reenact *The Book of the Dead* and worked on writing a script of the documentary film called *Gauley Bridge*, but it was never made into a film. It seems appropriate to conclude this essay with a discussion of the short script of the four sequences that originated from the poem and show how the poem emphasizes political views through the imagination more effectively than the motion picture. In the script, the whole sequences describe the workers working in the tunnel. In the middle of describing the hazardous working condition, there is a scene where Blankenship's voice narrates what he wrote in his letter. Rukeyser writes:

Dear Sir, My name is Mearl Blankenship.
I have worked for the Rinehart & Dennis Co.
many days and many nights
and it was so dusty you couldn't hardly see the lights.

From the table back to his wife's face. She goes on eating. She looks up again:

“We'll go to sleep right away. I'll do the dishes now.” (56)

Compared to the poem, the camera would show the face of the actor who reenacts Blankenship and his wife. But because his voice narrates the letter, the political allegory that was assigned in the poem through showing the grammatical errors is diminished in this script. In lieu of portraying Blankenship as a worker whose identity is marginalized, the film describes his life as an individual character. When Peyton appears in the script, he is a social worker who is waiting for his boss's order, looking at “The Negroes” getting paid (54). She writes,

Close-up: white hand giving Negro hand Company check: three dollars

Camera slides along wooden board on shack-wall to second half.

Close-up: white hand takes a check from Negro hand, gives him \$2.80 already counted out, hands it across shelf on which is painted: CHECKS CASHED BY RINEHART & DENNIS, CONTRACTORS. RATE – 10%.

Camera follows Negro to edge of grove. Peyton still standing there, looking down gorge. (54-5)

Instead of implying how the working conditions and payment do not fully represent the impact of the work on one's life and family, Rukeyser describes only how unfair the latter is in this script since the whole film is not about Peyton as an individual but instead about the tragedy. He had his own individual space and authority to narrate his story in the poem, but the film cannot illuminate every individual life so that the political aspect of criticizing the public's innocence is diminished. However because of this descriptive mode, the film gives more details than the poem. Readers of the poem do not know that Blankenship goes to the committee with Tinsley after writing the letter. Rukeyser writes “Blankenship opens the door. The Committee is ready to meet, they are all sitting, ten men and women, close around an

iron stove with a bulb hanging on its long wire directly over it. Blankenship lets Juanita through” (60) In other words, the film does not evoke the imagination but visually describes the tragedy and what transpires afterward. In *The Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser originally asserted broader political ideas through transforming the photo-narrative documents into poetry; but the film is, therefore, much less political in this sense, focusing on describing the actual tragedy in the tunnel and the individual worker rather than trying to present the tragedy as a source of political problems.

From this viewpoint, Rukeyser is an arbiter between the readers and the world that she documents in her poem. Her documentary poetry constitutes a “meeting-place between all the kinds of imagination” (xi). In general, the documentary genre innately generates certain “intervals” between the antithetical concepts that represent the audience in real life: “truth and reality, science and art, fiction and non-fiction, constative and performative, self-representation and media coverage” (Renov 11). The combination of photo-narrative documentary and lyrics dissolves these intervals while developing it into the leftist text emphasizing the human communication: *The Book of the Dead* has every feature of these concepts; the comparison between the film and the poem reveals the significance of her documentary poetics with the photo-narrative texts. By reviewing the documents, she creates a meeting place for every life, image, and the imagination that connects her journey as a poet and readers. Political poetry is a natural result of that meeting-place.

Rukeyser later develops the photo-narrative into “writing with pictures” for a younger generation in a number of children’s books. The collaborative book with Leonard Kessler *I Go Out*, which was published in 1961, consists of Rukeyser’s poetry and illustrations of Kessler. This experimental literary form is succeeded by and influenced our contemporary poets. In the next chapter, I will discuss how C.D. Wright develops this photo-

narrative documentary and the political dimension of the imagination in *Deepstep Come Shining* and *One Big Self*.

Abstraction, True Words, and One Untranslatable Song: C.D. Wright and Documentary Poetry

Modern critics denounce the documentary poetics that Rukeyser and Williams developed. They claim that the reproduced documents is the mimesis of the material world. Poet Nada Gordon claims that documentary poetry is “grasping for mimesis and reportage at the expense of verbal imagination,” and Randall Jarrell asserted that Williams’s *Paterson* is treated as “art” merely because it had “been copied out on the typewriter” (Gordon, “On Docu-Poetry”; Jarrell 239). This kind of denunciation is derived from a reductive view of the characteristics of documentary poetry that it has a reproduction of the documents or language not originally produced by the poet. The critics presume that it will be read as simply reportage and therefore it does not provide any source for imagination.

C.D. Wright was a humorous political poet from the South who seems to continue Rukeyser’s political documentary poetics to confront this kind of denunciation. But as a matter of fact, Wright’s poetics overturn the methodologies of documentary poetics that Rukeyser and Williams developed in two ways. Thus, she transforms stenography and photography into abstract poetic technologies that involve imagination, rebutting the denunciation of documentary poetry. In her book-length poem *Deepstep Come Shining*, Wright shows this process of transformation. For example, she includes copies of the stenographic papers produced by her mother who was a courtroom reporter in Arkansas. Many critics, including Stephen Burt, Kent Johnson, and Lynn Keller, point out that these copies imply a documentary mode. Indeed, we can make an argument that the facsimiles of her mother’s stenography make *Deepstep Come Shining* a kind of documentary poem. They could be seen as a reportage of what her mother was doing as a courtroom reporter. However, the facsimiles include wrinkles of the old papers and stains of ink, as well as the stenography itself. As a result, they are not perfectly legible and readers are compelled to imagine the full context. With that imagination, they become more than the courtroom reportage. That is to

say, the facsimiles in *Deepstep Come Shining* imply not only a documentary mode but also the imaginative mode of readers. Although the other voices and texts in the book are not literally illegible like the facsimiles, they are obscured since sentences are frequently fragmented or reframed. With this obscurity, Wright denies readers the ability to identify the literary contexts of the stenographic documents with the speakers.

Similarly, this obscurity is also materialized in Wright's lyrics in the poem. For example, the lyrics compel readers to virtually see from her perspective when she lyrically documents the landscape of the South. Readers might describe the landscape differently if they see it, but they simply imagine what she sees when they read the documents about the landscape since it is not visually presented to them by an image or a photograph. From this viewpoint, in *Deepstep Come Shining*, Wright imposes readers to imagine by obscuring what her writing means while combining two kinds of discourses—documents and lyrics—that often have been presumed incompatible. The former's objectivity, which is achieved through the juxtaposition of multiple voices, seems opposed to the latter's subjective voice produced by a poet. As Wright mentions in her conversation with Johnson, she describes her poems as "succinct but otherwise orthodox novels." She says:

Orthodoxy isn't really my bag, regardless of what I said in my mercifully statutorily outlived youth. But there are traditional elements in all of my writing. Narrativity has never been anathema to me. I just want to keep the writing interesting, pressing, first of all for myself, and secondly for anyone who bothers to read it. But I am always looking for my "one untranslatable song."

Therefore, obscuring what her writing means by making it difficult to read either literally or contextually—I will call this poetics "abstraction"—makes her poem comparable to the documentary poems that I previously discussed, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* and Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*. However, this abstraction simultaneously gives her

“one untranslatable song” obscurity that the preceding documentary poets did not have in their works. That is to say, the use of abstraction makes her poetry imaginative and peculiar at the same time.

Another technology that makes Wright’s poetics comparable to that of Rukeyser or Williams is photography. In Rukeyser’s case, as I discussed in the first chapter, she promoted the camera as a device to capture evidence. In *Deepstep Come Shining*, Wright focuses on the function of the camera that can capture the reflection of the world. She uses many words that indicate the objects which are literally tied to light. For example, words like “leglight,” “lotuslight,” “alligatorlight,” and “magnolialight” imply that light and the objects are tied and, more specifically, the objects radiate light. She acknowledges a scientific claim: “It is not that we live in a world of colored objects but that surfaces reflect a certain portion of the light hitting them” (79). This relationship of object and light recalls Roland Barthes’s claim that “the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent,” but the referent reflects “radiations” to the “spectator” (Barthes 80). In this way, Wright’s claim that “A photograph is a writing of the light. *Photo Graphein*” implies that she treats photography as a technology to see what the world reflects (3). As Barthes explains, the photograph is a “certificate of presence” that confirms the existence of the referent (87). Wright focuses on this “indexical” relationship between the photograph and its referent (Krauss 197).

However, Wright was not, of course, a photographer. The only photograph in *Deepstep Come Shining* is a remarkable single portrait on the cover, which was taken by a photographer, Deborah Luster. Consequently, we need to consider Wright’s later work *One Big Self* which collaborates with Luster’s portraits to determine how Wright’s insight about photography is embodied as a poetic technology. In *One Big Self*, Wright records her visit with Luster to Louisiana state prisons in order to document the prisoners. Luster had taken the photographs of the prisoners’ portraits in this process. In this portrait photography, the

indexical relationship between the photograph and its referent emerges again. According to the introduction of the companion volume of her photographs *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*, Luster emphasizes that she tried to capture the “very own selves” of the prisoners “before [her] camera” (Luster “The Reappearance”). In the photobook, readers see the portraits of the prisoners who pose in front of her camera. Readers do not exactly know who they are or what their poses or facial expressions mean. That is to say, readers look at the reflection of the prisoners but they cannot know the “selves” of the prisoners since looking at the reflection of the prisoners is equivalent to looking at the reflection of light hitting them. In this sense, readers naturally imagine who these people could be when they see the portraits since Luster and Wright deny them from knowing anything about the prisoners other than the visually colored figures in the photographs. From this standpoint, Wright’s insight about indexical photograph is turned into a poetic source for imagination. Every photograph can index a subject but only readers’ imagination can presume the referent’s essence.

From this viewpoint, Wright transformed two documentary technologies into a poetics. But another question comes up at this point: what does she do with these technologies in her poems? In *One Big Self*, Wright uses her documentary poetry as a political discourse, which is similar to Rukeyser’s poetic politics in *The Book of the Dead*. However, compared to Rukeyser’s leftist politics, Wright emphasizes the reintegration of all members in society. In *One Big Self: An Investigation*, Wright documents the interviews of state prisoners and provides them with her lyrics. By providing the portraits of the prisoners and the stenography of the interviews, *One Big Self* politicizes the prison as an industrial complex and is concerned with the marginalized identities of the prisoners. Wright articulates this political discourse at the beginning of *One Big Self: An Investigation*. She writes a short introductory hybrid poem entitled “Stripe for Stripe”:

The world of the prison system springs up adjacent to the free world. As the towns decline, the prisons grow. As industries disappear, prisons proliferate, state-funded prison-building surges are complemented by private-investment promising “to be integral component of your corrections strategy,” according to an industry founder. The interrelation of poverty, illiteracy, substance and physical abuse, mental illness, race, and gender to the prison population is blaring to the naked eye and borne out in the statistics. (xiv)

In part, Wright uses the quote of the “industry founder” to emphasize the irony that the prison is an industrial complex. The institution is originally designed to help “the free world,” but Wright condemns any correlation based on the statistics between the prison population and other socio-political issues. Then, she extends this condemnation to emphasize the reintegration of the prisoners:

The popular perception is that art is apart. I insist is a part of. Something not in dispute that people in prison are apart from. If you can accept – whatever level of discipline and punishment you adhere to momentarily aside – that the ultimate goal should be to reunite the separated with the larger human enterprise, it might behoove us to see prisoners, among others, as they elect to be seen, in their larger selves. (xiv)

At one level, Wright suggests that the aim of *One Big Self* is to encourage readers to imagine the prisoners and their “selves” that are held *apart from* the larger society. But at another level, Wright also implies another reason why she is writing the poem. She emphasizes the political necessity of her poetry in the contemporary world when she specifically mentions the popular perception that art is apart. In one interview, Keller asks Wright about the line concerning “poetry’s possible efficacies” (Wright, “The Wolf Interview”). In lieu of answering directly, Wright asks back to Keller: “Well, who at this point in time can obliterate the tensions between feeling the utter necessity of poetry, and the near total disregard for its

existence? Who can explain its stubborn persistence in the larger culture?" For Wright, the public innocence of the prisoners and the "total disregard" for poetry are equivalent. That is to say, exemplifying how poetry can reunite all separated "selves" is another aim of *One Big Self*.

Because Luster tries to capture the "selves" in portraits and Wright politicizes the prison in her prose, many critics label *One Big Self* as a political project. However, the politics in *One Big Self* are more complicated than how those critics have construed it as about individual identity. They claim the political move of *One Big Self* aims to liberate the identities of the prisoners. Suzanne Wise describes that the voice of the prisoners "dominates Wright's account" in the poem, "shifting power away from the poet-witness as the arbiter of experiences" (405). Similarly, Burt interprets *One Big Self* as "a project of releasing people from bondage," and Grace Glueck claims that Luster "honors" the "identities" of the prisoners (Burt 50; Glueck 29). However, these critics do not consider whether Wright and Luster shared the same political ideas. They all presume that expressing one's identity in photography and poetry similarly liberates identity. This presumption may seem valid in the dimension of Luster's work since her portrait photography tries to capture an individual identity. But at this point, what is not clear is that whether Wright and Luster both pursue the liberation of prisoners' self-expression. Against the popular criticism that *One Big Self* pursues the liberation of the prisoners' individual identity, I argue that the poetics of *One Big Self* shows a political dimension of the imagination that subjugates the multiple "selves" to the society and strategically shifts readers' attention from individual identity to the socio-political forms of inequality that are associated with the formation of prison as an industrial complex. Wright's main strategy in this process is to expand the use of abstraction in writing that she previously developed in *Deepstep Come Shining*. That is to say, Wright's

collaboration with Luster makes *One Big Self* an exemplary poem that reintegrates every self to *one big self* and politicizes a socio-political form that needs to be revised.

In *One Big Self: An Investigation*, Wright retypes what the prisoners say. One of the ways she uses abstraction is by denying readers from discovering the names of the speakers. In the poem entitled “In the Mansion of Happiness,” she reproduces the short lines spoken by different prisoners. She writes:

I want to go home, Patricia whispered.

I won't say I like being in prison, but I have
learned a lot, and I like experiences. The terriblest part is being away
from your families. — Juanita

I miss my screenporch.

I know every word to every song on *Purple Rain*. — Willie

I'm never leaving here. — Grasshopper, in front of the woodshop,
posing beside a coffin he built

This is a kicks' camp. Nothing positive come out of here except the
praying. Never been around this many women in my life. Never picked
up cursing before. — down for manslaughter, forty years (5).

There are four obvious speakers: Patricia, Juanita, Willie, and Grasshopper. Literally, they are talking about their own personal thoughts. Patricia wants to go home and Juanita does not like to be in prison, but Willie's line intervenes and says he knows everything about the album *Purple Rain* which implies that he listened to it so many times that he can remember every word to every song. Grasshopper says that he is never leaving the prison: he must have been, indeed, there for a long time. Patricia and Juanita speak more about their desires to go home, but Willie and Grasshopper express a more mournful emotion about the time that they have been incarcerated in the prison. Wright simply places the actual names of each

individual speaker beside the short stenography, but the other lines do not have any further information about the speakers. For example, the only information about the one who speaks after Grasshopper is that he was sentenced to be incarcerated for forty years after his conviction for manslaughter. Readers do not know who is speaking these lines, so this technique prevents readers from distinguishing the narrators. However, because of this intentional blindness, readers are compelled to focus on the context of the prisoners' different stories, the identity of each individual narrator. Even though every speaker's emotion and voice are different in these short lines, they are all labeled as "prisoner." In other words, Wright makes this social label subjugate their individuality and voices. This subjugation causes readers to imagine the life of prisoners which contradicts the social mission of the prison to rehabilitate the prisoners and the prisoners' own desires to be recognized as distinct individuals.

However, this anonymity makes it sometimes difficult for readers to distinguish Wright's voice from the rest in her poem. Obviously, her own lyric voice intervenes between the multiple narrators and one of the most repetitive forms that she uses is the word *counting*. After the preface, she begins the poem with her first "count," and anaphora is the form that Wright most frequently uses for speaking directly to readers. She writes:

Count your fingers

Count your toes

Count your nose holes

Count your blessings

Count your stars (lucky or not)

Count your loose change

...

Count heads. Count the men's. Count the women's (3-4)

Although these lyrics are literally ordering us to count, the objects are all different. This implies that Wright is not simply repeating *count* but she is trying to emphasize what is being counted. For example, the objects she lists seem to have no relation to each other: fingers, toes, nose holes, blessings, stars, changes, heads, men, and women. The first three objects are simply part of human bodies, but these three objects do not seem to be related to the next three. The relationship of these objects are clarified when she tell us to count heads of the men and women since the roll call is a common image that readers can imagine when they see a prison. Considering the fact that Wright is visiting the prison, she is trying to describe that it is impossible for us to count the numerous prisoners. Even if the count of body parts and the roll call can produce a statistical knowledge about the prisoners, the remaining objects seem to have no relation to the prisoners. At this point, Wright challenges the popular perception about the prison that criminals are incarcerated to be re-educated and re-socialized. What she implies instead is that misfortune and haplessness also lead multiple lives to be in the prison. There is also a bailment that can rescue criminals from the destiny of imprisonment. This implies that it is wrong to claim that all prisoners are the criminals. In other words, Wright poses a question at this point: if there are other reasons for prisoners to be incarcerated in a prison rather than committing crimes, how could the prison be a proper place for punishing criminals?

The anonymity of the voices that the poem sets out to produce corresponds to Wright's previous form of abstraction in *Deepstep Come Shining*. However, the significant difference in *One Big Self* is that she provides clear prose for readers to aid them to understand what she obscures. This clarification makes her political discourse more approachable. By reading her prose that criticizes the malfunctioning prison system, readers' imagination is more clearly related to Wright's political discourse. While describing the

moment when she and Luster visit one of the state prisons, Wright tells readers how ironic the prisons are. She writes:

[A] guard told me he had made the mistake he had most dreaded making, delivering the execution letter, setting the date and the time, to the wrong man on death row.

In some prisons, you can't have a last cigarette, but Valium is permitted.

I heard about a petition in a town out West to take back the night sky. The locals thought they were getting a second minimum-security prison, an economic pick-me-up. Instead, a supermax sprang up, that perverse marriage of mind and technology. Lights from the new institution burn so intensely the stars have gone dark on them.

(xiii)

Readers realize that prisons are socially recognized as an “economic pick-me-up” for the nearby local areas. Therefore, Wright persuades readers that it is not valid to claim that every prison exists for reforming criminals. In this scene, Wright induces readers to imagine whether the social and political forms are responsible for the malfunctioning prison system and whether it is right to separate some prisoners who do not deserve to be incarcerated. The stars she writes about are a metaphor that implies that it is natural for humans to build a prison for the prisoners. However, lights from the supermax prison, which implies a political reality shaping it as an industrial complex, are so intense that it overthrows what prison system should have naturally been.

So this kind of political lyric subjugates the prisoners' identities and criticizes the prison system. The resultant question is: how do Wright's lyrics collaborate with Luster's photography without any contradiction? It is clear that Luster tries to capture the identities of the prisoners by her tintype portrait photography. At this point, we need to know how a portrait can capture one's identity prior to knowing how it collaborates with the poem since the anonymous voices of the texts shift the attention from the captured identities in the

portrait to socio-political forms that are associated to the prison system. Portraits are usually theatrical since a subject poses for the photographer. Luster would have known this. She wrote that she tried to make the portraits of the prisoners “as direct a telling as possible” (Luster, “The Reappearance”). Because of portraiture’s inherent theatricality, she underlines her anti-theatrical mode through the style of tintypes. As Michael Carlebach explains in *Working Stiffs: Occupational Portraits in the Age of Tintypes*, tintypes were first introduced in 1856 and they became popular among the working class because they were cheap and easily made. Most of all, they are known for “resisting some of the formalities associated with traditional portraiture” (Berner, “From Stenotype to Tintype”). Compared to the previous technique of daguerreotypes, tintype photographers tend to put more emphasis on the purpose of the photographs over aesthetic concerns. They use plain backgrounds and the only prop they feature is a clamp to clearly show the head of the subject. Because tintype photographers focused more on capturing the subject’s face clearly, their works allowed the subjects to take more active roles in the portraits. They could choose how to pose, the direction of their eyes, their facial expression, and even what they wore. That is to say, Luster’s tintype portraits enable the prisoners to release their “selves” with their own expression of identities and aspirations. In this sense, the woman on the cover of *One Big Self: An Investigation* and the other portraits in the photobook are the poetic collection of the “selves” of the prisoners. Indeed, since Luster does not provide more explanation, readers have to imagine what the prisoners are doing in the photographs.

However, when readers see the captured identities in the portraits and read Wright’s texts simultaneously, their attention is shifted away from the identities to both documents and lyrics. But this works in two different ways. First, Wright produces “captions for the photography” through stenography (Burt 42). The threshold of Luster’s photography is that it has no explanation at all. In *One Big Self: An Investigation*, Wright writes caption-like lines

that shift the attention of readers from the identities captured in photographs to socio-political problems associated with prisons that her lines depict. Considering the previous example, Wright writes, “I know every word to every song on *Purple Rain*. — Willie” in the poem entitled “In the Mansion of Happiness.” If we consider that Luster takes the pictures of the portraits, and that the lines are reproduced from the spoken language of the prisoners, this line looks like a caption for Willie’s portrait. But when readers see Willie’s portrait and read his short sentence, they must also imagine how much time Willie has spent as a prisoner so that he know every song in a single album. It is not enough to try to figure out how his portrait corresponds to his words. When a prisoner’s portrait and his documented words are read simultaneously, readers naturally imagine what his words contextually mean and how they are expressed in the portrait. At this point, they do not consider his words as an individual story but as the common tale of all prisoners. That is to say, photographs do not literally show anything about the individual and this threshold makes readers to focus on reading Wright’s texts are literally understandable. In this way, Wright shifts the attention of readers from the prisoners’ identities to the common issues of the prisoners they confess in the interview—such as time and inadequate life—and this persuades readers to realize that the prison system is not operating normally.

On the other hand, Wright lyrically intervenes in the stenography of her poems and thus frequently explains what Luster’s photography does not represent. For example, in the poem entitled “Lines of Defense Including Proceedings from the State of *Louisiane* vs. The Convergence of the Ur-real and the Unreal,” Wright documents a phone message that she recollects from one of the prisoners. In the middle of the voice mail, Wright intervenes with her lyric:

Difficult to look at the woman
much less photograph and not ask

about a scar that runs from one ear to the opposing breast

whose babies died of smoke inhalation. (65-6)

In this scene, Wright leads her readers to imagine the woman whom she faces. Compared to the other lyrics, she intentionally retains grammatical errors in this lyric to produce the metonymy, thus linking “scar” and “breast.” This implies the difficulty Luster might have while shifting from one subject to another, from one prisoner to another, when each brings her own disturbing stories. Indeed, readers might not want to see the woman in this scene. As a result, we need to consider these lines as an alternative for Luster’s photograph. For readers, reading this description alters looking at the portrait of the woman. In these lines, Wright does not distinguish that she is the only prisoner whom is difficult to look at. This indicates that she is not the only one who has a disturbing story. Readers do not know anything about her identity and they have to look her as one of the prisoners. If Wright wanted to capture a prisoner’s identity like Luster did in her photographs, why would she not give any emphasis on the woman’s individual identity on these alternative lines?

From this standpoint, Wright’s efforts to exclude what the prisoners have done in the past is particularly significant. In *One Big Self*, she is more interested in the political forms that prevent them from being re-socialized and the subjugation of the separated selves to the society rather than what kind of crimes each prisoner would have committed. The question that Wright provokes instead is: aren’t the society and politics also responsible for shaping a prison an industrial complex rather than a place for criminals to be re-socialized? As a matter of fact, Wright claims that *One Big Self* originated from her observation that prison was the main industry of Louisiana. The poem does not suggest any alternative to the social and political forms that shape the prison system. However, what Wright does succeed accomplishing with *One Big Self* is the provision of an exemplary contemporary poetry that shows where social and political change should occur: the malfunctioning prison system and

the abnormal life of the prisoners as a population. In this way, Wright's "one untranslatable song" in *One Big Self* implies the political role of poetry in the new millennium.

But why does this political role of poetry—showing where socio-political change should occur—matter? In *One Big Self*, criticizing the prison system and subjugating the separated selves of the prisoners represent this political role. For Wright, the political role is what makes poetry necessary. In "Rising, Falling, Hovering," a poem that she published in the *Chicago Review*, Wright emphasizes the political potentiality of poetry that she suggests in *One Big Self*. About the American bombing of Iraq, Wright writes "This is no time for poetry" (15). Here she alludes to W. H. Auden's famous line in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats:" "For poetry makes nothing happen." Wright asserts that "a death [is not] arrested nor a hair of a harm averted/by any scrawny farrago of letters" (23). However, she does not only admit that poetry makes nothing happen in a time of war but she also argues that "The first task is to recover the true words for being" (28). Taking an action and recovering the "true words" are, indeed, different political stances. What Wright was pursuing in *One Big Self* is recovering the "true words" for the prisoners. That is to say, she hoped to show how the prison system's malfunctioning and failure to reintegrate the separated selves of the prisoners are the "true words" about the issue.

During the interview, Keller asks Wright about the allusion to Yeats and what these lines imply. Answering the question, Wright gives an anecdotal response. She had an interview for a radio program but was told to be replaced by another writer and that her interview would be rescheduled later. Wright adds:

The rescheduling never occurred. ... I thought it had everything to do with the very capable interviewer not wanting to be caught out having to read a book of poetry; then having to discuss a book of poetry on the air for an hour. A reason was never given, so I have had to supply one as a matter of speculation. ... And along with many others of

my generation, it is not a state of fragmentation in which I strive to write, nor of assimilation, but one of reintegration (Wright “The Wolf Interview”)

It is important to notice that she strives to write for “reintegration,” an idea which is excluded in the popular criticism about her poetry. For Wright, writing for reintegration is a way to make her poetry approachable to the interviewer who is presumed not to appreciate poetry. In this way, the poetics of politics in *One Big Self* is the paragon of writing for reintegration.

C.D. Wright passed away on January 12, 2016. She once said, “Poetry is a necessity of life.” The necessity of poetry that she pursued in her experimental works *Deepstep Come Shining* and *One Big Self* reminds readers that she was a political writer who could pursue the recovery of the “true words.” In this sense, her poetics follow in the tradition of documentary poetics that Rukeyser and Williams developed, yet she simultaneously overturns that tradition while using stenography and photography. According to her politics in *One Big Self*, it must be us to not overlook the selves if we want to interrogate a socio-political form like the prison which we are all a part of. When we understand Wright’s pursuit of reintegrating the selves and the politics in *One Big Self*, we will be able to afford even her humor about the serious controversy about the capital punishment: “You want to be Westinghoused or Edisoned/Your pick you’re the one condemned/Tennessee’s retired chair available on eBay” (Wright 32). Perhaps that political understanding is the “true words” for readers and the “One Untranslatable Song” for Wright.

Racial Imaginary, Documentary, and Video Poetry: Claudia Rankine, *Citizen and Situation* Videos

The brutality of police officers' killings of African Americans has been an ongoing source of widespread anger and protest against racism and violence. When Michael Brown was unarmed but still shot by the police in 2014, the incident reminded us of the major effects of racism and why African-Americans still cannot feel perfectly safe as civilians in the nation. African-Americans raised an anti-racist maxim during their campaign: "Black Lives Matter." On one level, this maxim literally indicates their protests against racism. However, the ironic fact is that African-Americans labeled their own lives as *black* lives in the process. Thus, they habitually accepted a racial category in America. That is to say, they are protesting against the legacy of racism in America but their maxim ironically admits the category, which was a result of a racial categorization previously assigned by white supremacists before the Civil Rights Movement.

Claudia Rankine is a poet who understands the irony of anti-racism. She and Beth Loffreda claim that racism does "its ugly work" of "*not* manifesting itself clearly and indisputably" by undermining one's "ability to feel certain of exactly what forces are in play" ("On Whiteness"). Traditionally, white supremacists have discriminated the qualities of being white and black. They define the quality of being a white man, or "whiteness," as superior to that of being a black man, or "blackness" (Morrison 9). Before the Civil Rights Movement, whiteness was accepted as what Americans had to have. However, Rankine and Loffreda's different approach to racism speaks to contemporary African Americans: "You wonder if you've made your own prison" ("On Whiteness"). Rankine does not, indeed, deny the fact that it was white supremacists who discriminated against black people by degrading blackness. However, what her discourse implies is that African-Americans unconsciously admit the standards of blackness and whiteness when they claim racial equality with whites. What Rankine claims is that the racial equality African-Americans pursue distinguishes

blackness and whiteness before re-claiming their rights, and this traps them in their “own prison” of blackness. In other words, she claims that “race is racism” in the United States (“On Whiteness”). For Rankine, the reason that black lives should matter in the United States is not only because blackness should be racially equal to whiteness but also because African-Americans should be treated equally for having the same citizenship as white men in the United States. Hence, they should both be treated equally for having the same “Americanness” (Morrison 4).

Rankine develops this criticism about anti-racism and American citizenship through a racial imaginary in her poems. She and Loffreda write:

What we mean by a racial imaginary is something we all recognize quite easily: the way our culture has imagined over and over again the narrative opportunities, the kinds of feelings and attributes and situations and subjects and plots and forms “available” both to characters of different races and their authors. (“On Whiteness”)

They emphasize the importance of distinguishing between the general culture’s different imaginations of multiple races. Blackness and whiteness are forms of a racial imaginary since they have been how Americans culturally understand the other race. That is to say, a racial imaginary is an imagination of being a different race with different claims to citizenship.

As a female African-American poet, Rankine writes poetry that provides international readers with a racial imaginary of what it is like being a different race in America. When Michael Brown was shot, racism in the United States was treated as “not my problem” by many individuals worldwide because his death was “experienced differently in the body of a black man, and in the body of a black woman, and in the body of an Italian man, and in the body of a French woman” (Rankine, “On Being Seen”). She says that her poems are for “presenting space and a think tank” so that everyone can discuss race (Rankine, “Why I’m Spending”). Her poetry is a space for readers to “curate dialogues, have readings,

and talk about the ways in which the structure of white supremacy in American society influences our culture” (Rankine, “Why I’m Spending”). This move is similar to Toni Morrison’s idea of the imagination:

My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. To think about (and wrestle with) the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society. For them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for purposes of the work, *becoming*. (Morrison 4)

Rankine tries to make readers imagine becoming a different race with different citizenship in the “wholly racialized world.” In other words, producing a racial imaginary is a way for her to make racism understandable to an international audience.

Consequently the question at this point is: how does she make her racial imaginary understandable to an Italian man and a French woman who do not consider racism to be their problem? Rankine says:

I do think that one of the great things about social media today is that we can all see, at least, what it looks like. And hear from everybody. And then you have to decide whether you’re going to be silent or whether you’re going to stand in the corner and let things happen. But at least we know about it. (Rankine, “On Being Seen”)

Social media is a space for sharing multiple digital media internationally. For Rankine, going on Twitter can be like “stepping into a room” that she never knew existed. She is aware of the fact that digital media is culturally prominent in the postmodern world. Therefore, Rankine transforms her poetry into a form of visual poetry which is more culturally comprehensible to international readers. This form of visual poetry is technically called “electronic visual poetry” (Lennon 64). Such visual poetry is not “limited to verbal text,” or language, but

instead includes other electronic forms of representation, such as “images, sounds, or even actions that the computer is directed to perform” (Bolter 26). Video poetry is a typical example of such electronic visual poetry. Rankine, of course, also includes non-linguistic elements in her visual poetry.

At this moment when postmodernists are accustomed to hearing from figures such as Jonathan Franzen that experimental literature is no longer relevant, Rankine’s experimental mode explains how free the form of poetry can be and how poetry can be more imaginative when readers are faced with less literal and cultural “incomprehensibility” (Williams 21). For postmodern readers, non-linguistic elements such as visual images or sounds are culturally more familiar and less esoteric than printed texts. For example, sound poetry uses a combination of literary and sound composition. In this poetry, sound “rejects meaning,” and readers listen only to sound in performance as the sound is “the probing of the limits of intelligibility and referentiality” (N. Perloff 97-8). Readers have to imagine to understand the “referentiality” of the sound itself. In this case, the sound in a performance substitutes for reading words in a poem. This free form of poetry makes the “electronic visual poetry” to be labeled as poetry in the postmodern world.¹

From this viewpoint, both Rankine’s poem *Citizen: An American Lyric* and the book’s companion *Situation* videos must be read as both poetic and political works. *Citizen* consists of Rankine’s lyrics and multiple documentary poems that invite readers to engage in a racial imaginary. The *Situation* videos are collaborative video poems composed of her reading of texts from *Citizen* as soundtracks for videos produced by her spouse, John Lucas. I will argue that *Citizen* and the *Situation* videos suggest an alternative to traditional poetry,

¹Because of such free forms, many avant-garde motion pictures are confused with electronic visual poetry. “Avant-garde cinema” is an experimental mode of filmmaking that explores “alternatives to traditional narratives or methods” Electronic poetry does not intentionally experiment with new filmmaking technologies. Only the visual element is used as a part of the language in a single poem (Pramaggiore 247).

whose innovation is remarkable as it claims citizenship as a political core of anti-racism. With a meditation on activist struggles and aesthetics in both works, Rankine invites postmodern international readers into the imaginary world of racism to make the terms of race imaginable for other readers outside the United States. Otherwise, readers can never know who the narrators of the poems are speaking to and who “you” in *Citizen* refers to.

One of the ways Rankine makes readers engage the sphere of a racial imaginary is to combine video poetry with the documentary poetics that William Carlos Williams and Muriel Rukeyser developed. For example, a poem entitled “World Cup” in *Citizen* consists of stenographic lines as well as panoramic images that show Zinedine Zidane head-butting Italian defender Marco Materazzi during the FIFA World Cup in 2006. She reads:

Something is there before us that is neither the living person himself nor any sort of reality, neither the same as the one who is alive, nor another.

What is there is the absolute calm of what has found its place.

Every day I think about where I came from and I am still proud to be who I am...

Big Algerian shit, dirty terrorist, nigger

Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word. (*Citizen* 122)

Readers know that Rankine’s discourse is about racial politics since she uses the word “segregation.” If they only focus on reading the literary text, they would think these lines are originally written by Rankine. However, she provides the name of the original writer or the speaker of each line. The first two sentences were previously written by Maurice Blanchot, a French philosopher. They are from his discourse about death. The next sentence is spoken by Zidane, and the fourth sentence is the “Accounts of lip readers responding to the transcript of the World Cup” (*Citizen* 123). The last sentence is written by Ralph Ellison, an African American novelist. Even though all of the original producers of these lines are different, these

lines literally collaborate to form a single speech. At this point, the resonance of these stenographic lines, originally produced by multiple voices, emphasizes Rankine's criticism about the worldwide indifference to racism. According to her, individuals feel that racism is "not my problem" because they all experience it differently. However, with the combination of multiple voices in these lines, Rankine implies that "we experience differently, but it's all of ours" (Rankine, "On Being Seen"). Although every French, Italian, and African American person experiences blackness differently, they all experience it and they universally know that racism should be problematized worldwide.

The resonance of these multiple voices in "World Cup" is maximized in the first *Situation* video, which is also entitled "Situation 1." The images that Rankine provides in the book are actually stills from a short motion picture. In the video, Lucas intentionally lowers the frame rate of the footage of Zidane's headbutt to emphasize the original six-second video. While Rankine is reading the poem, the nine-second footage is expanded to a six-minute video. Readers who do not know about the incident definitely would not know that the nine-second was the final moments of the player's career but they do know that the video does not simply want to speak about how the other player ended his career. When Rankine reads the poem, it seems to have no literal relation to the video. Readers do not know the original sources of the lines. When they listen to Rankine's voice reading the stenographic lines and watch the footage simultaneously, the video poem creates a kind of imaginative conversation between readers and Rankine, even though the language is reproduced from the other sources. In this conversation, there is a dialectic tension, and readers naturally identify themselves with Rankine's voice and an American perspective on racial politics.

About the footage in the video and her reading of the poem, Rankine says:

The ability to freeze the frame challenges the language of the script to meet the moment literally second by second—in the Zidane World Cup piece, for example—to know as

the moment knows, and not from outside. The indwelling of those Situation pieces becomes a performance of switching your body out with the body in the frame and moving methodically through pathways of thought and positionings. (Rankine, “Claudia Rankine by Lauren Berlant”)

By identifying themselves with Rankine’s voice and an American perspective on racial politics, readers participate in a form of racial imaginary. That is to say, the combination of traditional documentary poetry and video poetry problematizes and emphasizes the fact that every human being experiences racism but feels that it is not his problem. The racial imaginary in the dialectical tension between readers, and Rankine reminds them that they also experience racism.

This dialectical tension between Rankine and her readers is intensified when she makes readers identify with characters in the poem. With the use of the word “you” in *Citizen*, Rankine places readers in the middle of a racial imaginary. For example, she writes:

You are rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood of Santa Monica. This friend says, as you walk toward her, You are late, you nappy-headed ho. What did you say? You ask, though you have heard every word. This person has never before referred to you like this in your presence, never before code-switched in this manner. ... Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of “black people time.” (*Citizen* 41)

Readers know that they are not physically in this narrative. However, the word “you” blurs the distinction between the reader’s experience and the poem’s narrative. In this way, her poem provides an indirect and imaginative opportunity for readers to experience what racism actually is. In other words, making readers become part of her poem creates another space for them to experience the stereotypes about “black people time.”

What is noticeable in these poems is that Rankine focuses on two kinds of aggressions: “what is commonly known as microaggressions, the small moments” and major moments such as the murders of black men (Rankine, “Using poetry”). The major moments are known to the general public, but the microaggressions against African Americans cannot get the attention of the world. Rankine says “I feel like it’s my personal mission to keep those stories as present as I am possibly able to keep them present” (“Using poetry”). One of the exemplary poems that she writes to show what microaggression is entitled “Stop-and-Frisk.” In this poem, readers’ imagination experiences more dialectical tension when Rankine compels “you” to be identified with “I.” In the poem, she writes:

I knew whatever was in front of me was happening and then the police vehicle came to a screeching halt in front of me like they were setting up a blockade. Everywhere were flashes, a siren sounding and a stretched-out roar. Get on the ground. Get on the ground now. Then I just knew. (*Citizen* 105)

Obviously, Rankine describes the stop-and-frisk practices in this narrative and there are two speakers. She does not clearly say whether the narrative is about herself, but she uses the pronoun “I” to make readers imagine the first person view. That is to say, the two first-person personal pronouns—“you” and “I”—places readers to imagine being in the racialized world. Then she persuades “you” that stop-and-frisk practices are an injustice. She writes:

This is what it looks like. You know this is wrong. This is not what it looks like. You need to be quiet. This is wrong. You need to close your mouth now. This is what it looks like. Why are you talking if you haven’t done anything wrong?
And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description. (*Citizen* 108)

In this scene, the officer denies “you” the ability to speak for himself. However, it is ironic that the voice of this officer asks “Why are you talking if you haven’t done anything wrong?”

After all, the racial imaginary compels readers to see that what they imagine in these lines is a form of justice being transformed into an injustice.

These different voices do not physically exist in the video, and that absence makes the racial imaginary even more visually apparent. In the sixth *Situation* video, Rankine's voice reads "Stop-and-Frisk" and Lucas juxtaposes short documentary shots. When Rankine's voice reads the poem, the personal pronouns are used for placing readers in a position of the listener more directly. About the video, Rankine explains:

One of the situation videos entitles "Stop and Frisk," we did here in Claremont using Pomona students, because we wanted to look at what it meant for young black men to just be walking and trying to engage in their dailyness, and having the police and the threat of the police hovering. (Rankine, "Using poetry")

During the first few seconds, Lucas simply starts to show the mundane life of Pomona students. They walk on the street and go shopping to buy clothes and sneakers. At this moment, Lucas introduces a sound of radio with a wrong frequency, and a siren eventually becomes audible in the first thirty seconds. The remarkable technique that Lucas applies in this video is the insufficient fidelity of the sound and the visual images. Once Rankine's voice reads the line "a siren sounding and a stretched-out roar," the video actually superimposes the lights of the police car over the scene, and readers begin to hear the siren and police communication from the radio. When the lights of the police car are superimposed over the shots of the African-American men, the scene implies that their mundane life is under the surveillance of the police. So ultimately there is a fidelity between the sound and the images. However, what happens in Rankine's narrative poem is not physically embodied in the video. Ironically, for readers, this infidelity makes the racial imaginary more visually imaginable than watching the visualized version of the narrative. Considering that her intention was to look at the young black men under the threat of the police hovering, this

authority of the police and the dailyness of racism indicate a microaggression against African Americans, which are considered minor.

About the microaggressions that she portrays in this poem and the other in *Citizen*, Rankine says “I feel like it’s my personal mission to keep those stories as present as I am possibly able to keep them present” (“Using poetry”). In other words, Rankine articulates that the stories in *Citizen* are part of a literary politics. She does not criticize white supremacists. Instead, what her poem successfully does is presenting the racial imaginary to international readers and thus inhabiting what kind of injustice should be recognized. When Michael Brown was shot, Rankine said:

As much as I would like to think that Ferguson would be a game-changing moment, it’s hard for me to put faith in that. This kind of perpetual, aspirational hope of recognition of injustice that keeps not happening builds up in the self. And it’s fascinating to me that I keep having the hope and keep knowing it’s not going to happen. (“Using poetry”)

For her, presenting the racial imaginary in *Citizen* is how she hopes to help the worldwide recognition of injustice. She does not believe that her hope will be realized. The worldwide indifference about injustice will not be resolved. However, that prediction is what makes her poem politically necessary. Because of how she represents a racial imaginary in *Citizen* and the *Situation* videos, Rankine shows the kind of literary politics that poetry can potentially perform. For her, racism is a complicated problem, which should be treated globally in the new millennium.

Conclusion

The essential quality of poetry has been what we traditionally call literary merit. Literary merit is, of course, related to the high quality of literary works. It is, therefore, subjective and cannot be defined. However, there is a universal idea that the aesthetic value of poetry—which corresponds to the idea of literary merit—is a “relic of a scholarly elite” (Thaler 68). Because poetry has been traditionally understood as an unintelligible subject by the majority of people not in academia, it was excluded from consideration as the artistic representation of the worldwide culture as well as the American zeitgeist. The plain language and objectivism of Williams were castigated due to a reductive view of modern critics and poets who thought literary merit was an essential quality of poetry. As I discussed, the incomprehensibility and the crude symbolism that Williams criticizes in *Spring and All* are qualities that his earlier poetry had used to claim literary merit. That is to say, his poetics did not satisfy the criteria that appraised the traditional poems to have literary merit: the use of rhetorical devices and various styles of diction, rhythm, and syntax.

However, the qualities that might cause us to label the poems of Wright and Rankine as experimental are precisely those that make them more politically intriguing to a poetry-phobic generation of the world which still considers poetry a scholarly subject. Otherwise, *One Big Self* might not have been selected as a notable book of the year by *The New York Times* and *Citizen* would not have won national awards for Rankine. The reputation of the poems indicates how poetry could be successful in the new millennium. In other words, the political imagination proposes what kind of direction that poets can aim to produce languages that are readable to the contemporary generation.

But even if the political dimension of the imagination intrigues the public, could it also be assessed to have literary merit? According to Williams, his previous poems were anti-poetic. Therefore, the poetics that Williams developed—which are continued by the other two

poets—should be re-evaluated with new criteria for measuring literary merit. And the criteria did change as the postmodern world changed ideas about what poetry could be. There is criteria of defining literary merit of a work, first suggested by Walter Van Tilburg Clark.

While he was responding to the obscenity trial for Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl":

I think the test of literary merit must be, to my mind, first, the sincerity of the writer. I would be willing, I think, even to add the seriousness of purpose of the writer, if we do not by that leave out the fact that a writer can have a fundamental serious purpose and make a humorous approach to it. I would add also there are certain specific ways in which craftsmanship at least of a piece of work, if not in any sense the art, which to my mind involves more, may be tested. (Morgan and Peters 155-6)

As the aesthetic values of poetry have diversified since the Second World War, methods other than literary devices such as roles and purposes of writers can be a new criteria to assess a text's poetic value and literary merit. Williams's poetics and the political imagination should be re-evaluated as a hallmark of a Modernist poetry which suggested a new aim for contemporary writers to expand their socio-political roles and purposes in literary texts. In that sense, Wright and Rankine successfully followed his lead in the new millennium. Poetry is still known as a scholarly subject. However, the change that Wright and Rankine have demonstrated by succeeding the poetics of Rukeyser and Williams implies that poetry can still be potentially the artistic representation of our generation, and it can do so by correcting the platform to other more popular media.

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