Meridel LeSueur: Metaphors from the Margins

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Meridel Le Sueur—nationally renowned for her journalism, literature, and children's books and regionally renowned for her poetry, short prose, and essays—has been all but ignored in academia. Although her work is rarely taught, its clear prose, rich metaphoric language, and strong connection to the Midwest make Le Sueur's work especially appropriate to Minnesota university and high school classrooms. Her death, fifteen years ago,[1] has renewed interest in her work, especially with regard to recent interest in the depression era Midwest Federal Writers Project and the resulting Smithsonian Institute's documentary titled, *Soul of a People: Writing America's Story* released in 2010.[2]

Although this paper does not offer specific pedagogical exercises for using Le Sueur's works in the classroom, an analysis of three short pieces should exemplify just how easily accessible her earth bound metaphors are, even for students who are unfamiliar with literary analysis. Moreover, the issues she deals with connect directly with current issues like poverty, anti-unionism, immigration, and the environment—all set in a familiar Midwest landscape. When paired with the Smithsonian documentary, Le Sueur's work can provide a relevant and timely focus for learning and writing about metaphor.

Meridel Le Sueur lived and wrote for most of her life in the Midwest—in Oklahoma, Kansas, Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota. For nearly seven decades, her writing focused on oppressed groups, chronicling the often overlooked lives of women, Blacks, farm families, and laborers. Most of her writing concentrates on Midwestern life and her ethos with her Midwestern audience, up to the beginning of McCarthyism, was strong. Le Sueur wrote with an authority arising from her own struggles on the margins as a Marxist, laborer, woman, and farmer; a regional authority born on the prairies where battles with political forces blended with battles with soil and weather; and a creative authority that used familiar scenes, and earthy, womanly metaphor as her primary rhetorical strategies. These rhetorical strategies create a familiar earthy space that is common and commonly understood by even her detractors.

And she had many detractors. Even within her own Communist Party, language was often co-opted by the masculine, as terms like "'proletarian' and 'manly' were used interchangeably" (Obermueller 48). In her book, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur*, Constance Coiner explains that Le Sueur and Olsen "problematize the patriarchal nature of the Left and the masculinist assumptions of proletarian literature" (7). Le Sueur complicates the patriarchal norm not only by portraying women as interesting and textured characters, but also by repeatedly employing the metaphors of maternity, birth, growth, and death in writing about the value of the working person's experience, and, as Erin Obermueller explains, in doing so "she also historicizes and politicizes the body" (49).

This analysis adopts Michael Osborn's metaphorical families in considering Le Sueur's use of womanist metaphors and the brilliant regional nature of her writing in a brief examination of three short stories initially published in the socialist periodicals, *Mainstream* and *Mainstream and the Masses*, between 1947 and 1958. During that period, Le Sueur was blacklisted for activities in the American Communist Party and, as a result, no mainstream press would publish her work. Her writing was published instead by small Midwestern presses, at least until the 1970's when her short fiction was re-discovered and compiled by West End Press in Cambridge into a trilogy of anthologies comprising stories about Midwestern workers and their lives. The stories herein appear in West End's 1977 anthology, *Song for My Time: Stories of Repression*.

The titles selected for analysis in this essay are "Song for My Time," "Eroded Woman," and "American Bus." The anthology covers a post-World War II period covered characterized by an America increasingly suspicious of unionism, Socialism, and Communism. And all of the stories express a working-class desperation over the erosion of unionism and the shift of power to the wealthy.

In the introduction to the anthology a Le Sueur contemporary, Adelaide Bean, confirms that Le Sueur responded to "the desperation and anguish of those days," explaining that

> This was the time of the legal lynchings of Willie McGee[3] and the Martinsville Seven,[4] of the unti-union [sic] Taft-Hartley legislation, of the Smith Act[5] "conspiracy" trials and convictions, of the Rosenbergs' "atomic spy" trial and their executions; the dark time of the Korean War. (5)

Le Sueur's response to these political events was a body of highly-politicized short fiction focusing on workers' rights, the woman worker, racism, sexism, labor organizing, and children. To better understand Le Sueur's use of description and metaphor as strategies for advancing these political causes, Michael Osborn's metaphorical categories (as modified by Roderick Hart) are employed for analysis (147). These categories include:

- Water and the Sea
- Light and Dark
- The Human Body
- War (or struggle)
- Structures
- Animals
- The Family
- Above and Below
- Forward and Backward
- Natural Phenomena
- Sexuality

This list of metaphorical families echoes Le Sueur's many references to nature, family, and struggle in everyday blue collar Midwestern life, figuring prominently throughout most of Le Sueur's work. Julia Mickenberg contends that Le Sueur's regional loyalty was as strong as her commitment to leftist politics and feminism, which is in evidence in all three pieces analyzed here.

"Song for My Time"

In the story, "Song for My Time," the author effectively connects with her Midwestern audience by employing familiar, nature-bound imagery and metaphor to emphasize underlying themes of unionism and pacifism. Osborn's metaphorical categories of family, above and below, the human body, and natural phenomena dominate the list of metaphors in this piece, which tells the story of a grieving woman who is pressured to speak at a union picnic shortly after her brother's death as a soldier in World War II.

The following passage represents the uneasiness the protagonist feels because her brother's remains lie somewhere in Spain—far from the family's land in Wisconsin. She

complains, "I felt bitter as milkweed that my brother would not have the comfort of those little hills for sleep with our grandfathers" (9). A Midwest rural audience would naturally understand the bitterness of the sap of the native milkweed plant, which was used as a home remedy, but also known to be toxic. The idea of death as sleep and expectations of sleeping with family in death express a theme present in most of Le Sueur's work. The references to plant and earth in this short passage set a rural, earthy tone even before the central picnic scene is described, as in the following excerpt:

> They came in old cars. They dropped their babies in the grass. A group of tall dark people of a kind I had never seen took the table next to ours. I could not take my eyes from them. One young man, his unaccustomed shirt white as snow, was making cracks in a foreign language about all the young girls. The eyes of the older women rolled knowingly over the heads of their suckling children. And fright struck in me like a bell. I could not understand how they could go on and on in all the risk and danger. (11)

The description sets a familiar picnic image, including guileless images of familial humor, innocent babies, suckling children, and "white as snow" shirts, while the metaphor, "fright struck in me like a bell," both visceral and emphatic, forces a recognition of Le Sueur's anti-war theme. The "bell" stops all action for a moment, emphasizing that all is not well with this world—an emphatic strategy employed frequently throughout Le Sueur's fiction. The reference to a natural sexuality in the young man's flirtation suggests that life goes on, that coupling will ensue, that more babies will be born in perpetuity. This "life as usual" scene stops with the bell when, suddenly, the reader is forced to feel the protagonist's physical grief in the midst of the pastoral scene.

Near the end of the story, Le Sueur once again expresses the ideas of "above and below," "the human body," and, "natural phenomenon" in the following passage, which describes the main character's physical, intellectual, and emotional transformation as she leaves behind a paralyzing grief and begins to speak to the crowd of union members.

> For the very first time in my life I felt the draw and pull and strength of something outside my own mouse grief . . . . I had a feeling of great power as if it would grow and enter every being. I said, using the only language known to me of fertilization and growth, that this is a dark time, the seed goes down into the soil not beautiful but strong and hard. Like in Europe, the miracle of the underground, not of birds singing in trees, no, underground. (17)

The animal metaphor of the mouse expresses the insignificance of her own feelings in the face of the far greater needs of the workers assembled at the union picnic. This small grief might be placed in Osborn's backward and forward category as the young woman leaves her grief behind to go forward into the future. Additionally "seed and soil" and "fertilization and growth" illustrate conditions existing above and below in nature, while the cryptic reference to the underground refers to the above ground dominant ideology versus the underground union and communist movement. "The birds singing" in the underground subtly supports the idea of a good union movement and of the struggle against an evil tyranny—as in European resistance against Hitler during World War II.

"Eroded Woman"

"Eroded Women" is written from the point of view of a woman union activist, who spends the night at the home of a poor Oklahoma mining family. The dominant themes are unionism, poverty, feminism. The most frequently used metaphoric categories in this story are the human body, struggle, and nature. The protagonist is the matriarch of the home, a woman whose hard life disguises her real biological age. The initial description of the woman focuses on the image of her body as reflective of her condition and of her personality.

> She was spare, clad in a kind of flour sack with a hole cut in the middle, showing the hulk of her bones and also the peculiar shyness, tenderness and dignity of a woman who has borne children, been much alone, and is still strong set against rebuff . . . . When I told her who sent me she let me into the rickety house which seemed only an extension of her gothic body. (19)

That her hulking bony body expresses her "shyness, tenderness and dignity" is a subtle metaphor. It expresses the physical and metaphysical persona of a typical back country woman—coarse and unsophisticated, but loving and wise. The woman's wisdom is borne out later in the story. The "gothic" image refers not only to the angularity of the woman's physique and her house, but also to the grotesque and desolate nature of both. Both images fit also into Osborn's "structure" category, as the woman's body is compared to the house.

The "gothic" image is recalled for a second time as Le Sueur describes the woman's physicality as suggestive of her hard life:

> I could feel the clearness of the woman, the edge, the honor, the *gothic* [italics mine] simplicity of the lean struggle and the clarity and honor with which she lived. She was close to the bone, her face honest as her house with the terrible nakedness of a tool, used as a tool is used, discarded as a tool, worked as a tool, uncared for as a human. (22)

Notice the repeated comparison between the woman's image and that of her house. Additionally, Le Sueur uses the idea of tool in describing the woman who is used by her husband, her children, and the mining bosses. This use of a human as an inhuman instrument in service to a dominant capitalistic patriarchy supports the author's implicit argument for better conditions for the woman laborer.

Le Sueur repeatedly describes middle American scenes—this time a poverty-stricken homestead in Oklahoma. Metaphors pertaining to nature, the human body, and struggle fill out the story's conclusion as Le Sueur introduces a new metaphoric category—water .

> All over mid-America now lamplight reveals the old earth, reveals the story of water, and the sound of water in the darkness repeats the myth and legends of old struggles. The fields lie there, the plow handles wet, standing useless in the mud, the countless seeds, the little houses, the big houses, the vast spider network of us all in the womb of history, looking fearful, not knowing at this moment the strength, doubting the strength, often fearful of giant menace, fearful of peculiar strains and wild boar power and small eyes of the fox. (25)

Water, in this excerpt, symbolizes the cycles of drought and flood, as well as the cycles of life that make up the history of those living on the prairie. The "womb of history," suggests that these historical cycles, like a woman's menstrual, birth, and death cycles are not controllable—making us all equally susceptible to life's whims. Earlier in the story, the protagonist complains of "furriners" (20), tells of her fears of Indians, Jews, and Communists and complains they all take the jobs of working folks. Le Sueur worked all of her life against this divisive perspective and sought to bring all people together in harmony and to advance equal rights for all. With the nature and animal metaphors, including "peculiar strains," "wild boar power," and "the small eyes of the fox," she skillfully supports idea that we are all alike and pokes fun at the irrational fears that we all have of the furriner or the unfamiliar.

"American Bus"

"American Bus" tells of a bus trip "beginning and ending at the prairie" through the Midwestern countryside during which anonymous characters and scenes come and go with the movement and periodic stopping of the bus. The primary cause Le Sueur advocates in this piece is, again, unionism supported by an implicit narrative plea for equality for all. The metaphors, primarily nature bound, also describe ideas of above and below and the human body—especially the womanly body. She also employs the strategy illustrated in the first excerpt in "Song for My Time," during which a bell stops the action and reminds the reader of the theme. The following example from "American Bus" contains most of those strategies, including the action-stopping metaphor:

> I listen to the conversation, imbibing the rich day and night talk of the countryside, the quick knowing of the earth and the machine. Yet the old American fear strikes into me and I feel a sense of doom and wretchedness so I can hardly breathe. I see our people so strong, so tough and fey, so keen, quick, accurate, so humorous, full of whimsy, fantasy, prankishness, such inside-out prairie waifs, so strong and enduring, yet often turned ugly, living high upon the death of brothers, plowing deep into the earth, into the flesh of their fathers, pulling up as bones the substance of man's hope. (35-36).

Notice that natural phenomena constitute the largest metaphoric category in the "rich day and night talk of the countryside," "quick knowing of the earth," "inside-out prairie waifs," and plowing deep into the earth." These images set the scene. We are in the Midwest; we are traveling through unsophisticated countryside. Osborn's "above and below" category is represented by the references to those on top of the earth—their human activity, their strength, their energy, and the "death of brothers" while "pulling up bones" refers to what is below.

Le Sueur begins the excerpt with a light description of conversation and nature—a typical country traveling adventure—then stops that action as the protagonist begins to feel a deep fear, a fear so strong that, like the hammer that is suggested by the action, it strikes the breath from her chest. A reader almost has to inhale at that point. Just as in "Song for My Time," this is a typical Le Sueur emphatic strategy. She uses pastoral description to make the reader feel safe, and then pulls it all away—dramatically reminding the audience of the purpose of the story.

In the middle of the narrative, the protagonist describes a scene during which the bus has stopped and she finds herself in the restroom with a Mexican woman, a farm laborer with an

infant and toddler in tow. In this excerpt, a woman's body becomes a metaphoric reference to the cycles of life.

> The Mexican woman in the restroom where we stop for lunch bends down, resting in balance, the round sun ripe globe of her breast held between her fingers as she offers it to her baby, while I hold the little girl. She is glad to spill some of the pressure of her long trek now after working in beets, wheat, peas, corn, shacking all winter in a miserable hovel. (38)

The woman's breast becomes a globe, a ripened melon that feeds the child, just as the rest of her body toils to pick the fruit and vegetables that feed America. In a sense she suckles us all. The image of spilling the pressure of her hard life through the release of her breast milk jars us because of its disparate ideas—a hovel and then nursing. Hard and soft.

The following image describing a racist incident on the bus, involving a Black woman and child, once again reminds us of the injustices done to the poor and disenfranchised. The excerpt immediately follows the refusal of a white man to allow a Black mother and crippled child to sit in the only empty seat, which happens to be next to him. His harangue mortifies the narrator as it dismisses the mother with racial epithets and threats. The protagonist narrates the ensuing moments.

> The bus was absolutely quiet. The bus was absolutely quiet. The Negro woman did nothing but try to rest the broken body of the child on the seat arm. The bus driver was listening. I could feel the pulse in my own body and the weight of every white person on the bus suddenly alive in a horrible world of guilt, and before us the Negro stood looking straight into nothing. (40)

One feels the weight of guilt articulated in silence in the repeated first line. The guilt is palpable. The physicality of the moment is expressed through weight of guilt as it corresponds to the weight of the crippled child in the arms of its mother. Everyone on the bus carries something heavy. The pulse in the body of the narrator adds to the physical tension of the moment. Le Sueur's use of a woman's body as metaphoric vehicle to express guilt, shame, poverty, nature, and the cycles of life is an effective tool as it paints so vivid an image that it forces the reader's physical recognition.

Although some of the poverty, inequalities, and injustices of the post-World War II era, represented by these stories, may not seem as harsh today, much inequity is still with us. Students should have little trouble drawing connections from Le Sueur's injustices to the current marginalization of the poor and homeless, to the protest themes of the Occupy movement, to the large unemployed and underemployed population, and to union busting activities in Wisconsin. Meridel Le Sueur's stories are especially relevant for today's writing classrooms. The fiction is lively enough to keep a first year composition student engaged, and stylistically rich enough to allow for detailed literary or rhetorical analysis. Michael Osborn's categories offer an easily understood jumping off point.

An effective sequencing for using Le Sueur's fiction to teach metaphoric language would be as follows. First, define metaphor with examples from Le Sueur's shorter fiction. Then introduce students to Michael Osborn's metaphoric categories and employ the framework to demonstrate your own analysis of Le Sueur's work. In pairs or small groups, students then

analyze one of the author's short works with instructions not only to identify metaphoric categories, but also to describe how the metaphors add to the meaning of the text. At this low-risk stage, students should be encouraged to be creative and to develop their analyses as fully as possible. A final individual project would have them work on their own to fully analyze a piece fiction by Le Sueur or another author. In addition to works analyzed here, Le Sueur's *The Girl* (recently re-released), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and many of Edgar Allen Poe's short fiction (e.g., "The Tell-Tale Heart" are short, but rich enough in metaphor that they also fit well with Osborn's categories.

One final comment and perhaps, a warning: this is not perfectly correct prose; however, her diversion from academic writing conventions could offer a point of discussion of style. Meridel Le Sueur could be free and easy with sentence construction and punctuation. Her narrative form and style, at times, crosses the line between poetry and prose. Her creative use of stylistic conventions may have been because she was largely uneducated, but also because she was a rebel who scorned convention. One of the institutions she rebelled against was academia. As an example, in a film interview, she bristled when reminded of her somewhat coarse and free-flowing style. When asked about her style she retorted sarcastically, "I don't separate prose and poetry. That's been done by the academic world" (*Northern Lights and Insights)*.

Notes

1. The following obituary briefly outlines her life, as it appeared in the *New York Times*:

November 24, 1996

Meridel Le Sueur, 96, Reporter and Children's Book Writer

By Wolfgang Saxon

Meridel Le Sueur, who reported on the plight of the poor during the Depression and celebrated the free spirits of early Americans in her fiction for children, died on Nov. 14 in Hudson Memorial Hospital in Hudson, Wis. She was 96 and had lived in the hospital's residential unit in nearby St. Paul, Minn., for the last few years.

Miss Le Sueur, a native of Murray, Iowa, grew up among the radical farmer and labor groups that informed her youth, like the Populists, the Farmers Alliance and the Wobblies, the Industrial Workers of the World. Her first story was published in a literary magazine in 1927, and she kept writing into her 90s. . . . .

Blacklisted during the McCarthy period, she continued to write, turning out experimental prose works, novels and poems and storing them in her basement in Minnesota.

2. See the *Smithsonian Channel* website for information on the documentary project including short biographies of depression era writers who were part of the "Midwestern Depression Era Writers' Project," project information, short video excerpts, and information about purchasing the documentary. URL: http://www.smithsonianchannel.com/site/sn/show.do?show=135396

3. In 1951, Willie McGee was executed in Mississippi for raping a white woman, despite evidence that the couple had had a relationship for four years. Bella Abzug was his defending attorney.

4. Seven young men from Martinsville, Virginia, who were executed for raping a white woman in 1949.

5. Anti-sedition legislation underlying Joseph McCarthy's charges against alleged Communists.

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