an interview with

MARK NOWAK

Conducted by Steel Wagstaff

Documentary poet, social critic, and labor activist Mark Nowak was born in 1964 to a working-class family and raised in a predominantly Polish neighborhood in Buffalo, New York. After completing his M.F.A. at Bowling Green State University, Nowak taught for fifteen years at an open-enrollment community college in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and is now the director of the Rose O'Neill Literary House at Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland. He is the author of three books, all published by Coffee House Press: *Revenants* (2000), *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004), and *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009). Nowak edited Theodore Enslin's *Then and Now: Selected Poems, 1943–1993* (National Poetry Foundation, 1999) and coedited, with Diane Glancy, the anthology *Visit Teepee Town: Native Writings after the Detours* (Coffee House, 1999). His essays and criticism have been published in *The Progressive*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *Goth: Undead Subculture* (Duke UP, 2007). Nowak is the founding editor of the journal *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics* and has been active on the Web both as a contributor to the Poetry Foundation's Harriet blog and as the operator of the Coal Mountain blog, which serves as an international clearinghouse for news about labor and safety conditions in resource-extraction industries around the world. In recent years, Nowak has facilitated a series of "poetry dialogues" between Ford autoworkers at plants in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Port Elizabeth and Pretoria, South Africa. His work in South Africa has led him to edit a special double issue of *XCP* on South

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African literature and social movements. Nowak was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 2010.

I first read Mark Nowak's poetry by accident, in a library. I had picked up a copy of Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell's *American Poets in the Twenty-First Century: The New Poetics* (Wesleyan, 2007) and was browsing to see what had been anthologized in it. When I read (and saw) the poetry and photographs excerpted from Nowak's *Shut Up Shut Down*, I was instantly intrigued. My family history certainly predisposed me toward an interest in Nowak's investigation of the cost of global extractive industries, an undertaking that he begins in the last section of *Shut Up Shut Down* and to which he devotes the entirety of *Coal Mountain Elementary*, but Nowak's writing drew me for other reasons as well.

Nowak's verse is formally innovative and experimental and yet has a clarity, intensity, and righteousness that strike me as charged by a refreshing and sincere commitment. To borrow the phrasing of George Oppen, Nowak's work demonstrates its bewilderment at the "shipwreck / Of the singular" by choosing to explore instead "the meaning of being numerous." By this I mean that Nowak's books frequently invoke the collective, are most concerned with the plural "we," and show their attentiveness through their fidelity to the real despair, rage, and good-natured humor of the individuals they speak both for and with. Nowak's poetry is as intense, compassionate, committed, and deeply earnest as the human beings whose stories and voices he documents. Most impressively, however, Nowak's poems arouse our sense of justice and engage our more humane sensibilities even as they ultimately direct us away from despair as well as quietism. While Nowak's work does present wrenching accounts of quietly desperate lives, he clearly is neither strident nor bitter but an author who understands the classical story of Pandora quite well, recognizing that despite the great evils loosed upon the world, there still remains some hope for human lives here and now, in our neighborhoods. In *Revenants*, Nowak writes, "believe it or not, we cannot / lay hold / of all things // and make them theorems," a maxim as useful as an ecological and

social ethic as it is as a warning against the practical dangers of totalizing ideology (71).

Nowak's poetry is likewise notable for the method by which it exerts its considerable appeal to human sympathy. While strains of what could be referred to as an "other-centered poetics" are evident in *Revenants*, his first book, his commitment to innovative documentary poetry has become increasingly clear in his subsequent work. Nowak's presentation of the material facts existing in the communities and industries documented in his poems and photographs would seem to be directed by a number of related impulses, chief among them a belief that his writing might produce an "appreciation / of social life / as constituted by ongoing, fluid processes," an appreciation that can only be formed by "close, continuing participation / in the lives of others" (*Revenants* 92). More than ideology, it is this sustained commitment to "close, continuing participation" that I find most notable and praiseworthy about Nowak's writing. At its best, it fulfills the poetic ambition that Oppen expressed in "Of Being Numerous," to "tell what happens in a life, what choices present themselves, what the world is for us."

Throughout *Revenants*, Nowak works to discover and understand "what the world is for us" by examining the emotional roots grounding him in the traditions of his Old World ancestors, as well as the bonds of labor holding him to his family home in Buffalo. Despite the hopefulness that flashes through occasionally, as when the *piosenka* (song) is invited in and heard, "suggest[ing] a center, a place to return" (32), the overriding sense of community and place in this early work is not one of stability and rootedness but of loss, dissolution, and the ghostly. We are introduced primarily to families whose "past in this place // does not quite belong," whose stories cannot be told straight, whose present is haunted in some way by their relationship to histories, both mythical and mundane (16).

The titular revenants that appear throughout this volume are felt most strongly in Nowak's depiction of the Polish American enclave on Buffalo's east side, a locality from which "nearly everyone" has vanished, leaving only "yards where tomatoes rot, and cabbage rots. / Each nearly empty, or as if to be silenced"

(65). These early poems are a bleak account of one of the most persistent versions of the human experience: the gradual decay and destruction of the home place, the erosion of the hearth, the degradation of the environment, and the setting out in search of something new and full of promise (figured in American history as the frontier). The search for a place to which we belong is both the heart of *Revenants* and a recurring focus in all of Nowak's work. While his subsequent books have not preserved the same lyric voice, Nowak's concern for working people and their communities, their place in the total life-world, has not waned. In *Revenants*, Nowak presents an account of human lives in which the dream of the frontier is shown to be a painful illusion, its promise of plenty all too often unfulfilled. In one poem, we're told that "there's a basket at the other end [of the sky]," and though that basket is "not our own," "we want what's there, so we stretch our hand / beyond the edge of the table because we've heard there's some better fruit / to be had. / And we have been" (70).

Nowak's books are filled with men and women who have "been had," who bought into the American dream, or the promise of prosperity, who gave their lives and bodies in laboring, only to be disappointed, used up, betrayed, and disposed of. *Shut Up Shut Down* melds a dizzying and dazzling array of voices and source texts to document true stories of deindustrialization in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. Throughout the volume, Nowak refuses to let readers forget just what the stakes were and are for workers affected by corporate greed. The opening poem documents one man's insistence that "it wasn't just losing a job in the steel industry, but your entire life, the place that you grew up in was going to be gone" (11). *Shut Up Shut Down* portrays the effects of both corporate and governmental policies on several communities, from Bethlehem Steel Corporation's closure of the Lackawanna, New York, plant, to Ronald Reagan's ruthless breaking of the PATCO strike, to the shutting down of a taconite plant in Minnesota's Iron Range. Nowak's most recent book, *Coal Mountain Elementary*, documents and explores the costs of the global extraction industry by weaving color photographs from mining communities in the U.S. and

China with elementary-school lessons developed by the American Coal Foundation, news accounts of mining accidents in China, and testimony collected from survivors of the 2006 Sago Mine disaster in West Virginia.

One last thread that emerges in Nowak's first book and remains through all of his work is his fidelity to the voices of others. In *Shut Up Shut Down* and *Coal Mountain Elementary*, the poetic texts are assembled from an eclectic scattering of source material, with Nowak working less in the tradition of the lyric poet than in that of the DJ, sampler, and remixer. In texts that are by turns infuriating, heartbreaking, ironic, and movingly evocative, Nowak approaches his sources with both a shrewd eye and a generous heart. Despite corporate efforts to conceal the negative consequences of "deindustrialization," the process has hardly been smooth, painless, or fair, and Nowak's poetry has been singular in its insistence on attesting to the human suffering and social cost of economic decisions made in the distant (and well-compensated) sphere of upper-level management.

This interview was conducted via email during January 2010.

Q. When I first read your poetry, I was immediately attracted to both what you had to say and the way you chose to say it. I was particularly impressed with how political your writing is, and I'm curious about the origin of your political commitment. When and how did you form the political and social beliefs that undergird your writing?

A. I'd guess that the DNA of my political commitment has varied historical and contemporary origins: growing up in Buffalo in the late 1970s and early 1980s while every factory where every member of my family worked shuttered; visiting occupied and recuperated factories across Argentina in the summer of 2004; having a Rosie the Riveter as a grandmother, a union VP for a dad (before his plant closed and he went to work at Radio Shack and a liquor store), a mother who was a clerical worker and a cashier at the mall, and a wife whose family worked as firemen and nurses at Planned Parenthood and were members of the ILGWU [International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union]; and, of

course, the recharging of those commitments each and every day in my conversations with working people and labor activists both here in the States and around the world.

Q. In your first book, *Revenants*, your hometown, Buffalo, comes across as a haunted, sometimes bleak, intimately known, and deeply loved place. How did your family come to be in Buffalo?

A. My family, as far as I know, came directly from various parts of Poland to Buffalo sometime around 1900. We weren't a family that really kept and shared those stories of immigration, and it was only years later that I came to learn on my own that the Polish town my great-grandfather on the Nowak side of the family came from (Oświęcim) became, under the Nazi occupation, Auschwitz. I always wish I knew more of those stories. As for the city itself, its steel mills and railroads, its airplane and Westinghouse plants were where my family worked. And the years of those factories' slow deaths through layoffs, downsizing, corporate relocation to the South, and eventual closing impacted just about everyone in my family and in the families of my friends and neighbors. The neighborhoods, especially on the city's east side, took on the conditions one sees in the photos in *Revenants*, yet those were also the places where my family drank, bowled, went for a fish fry, got married, and had a catered Polish meal after someone in the family was buried.

Q. *Revenants* has a fairly extensive section exploring your Polish ancestry and heritage, including some mouthwatering descriptions of Polish food, like pierogi. How much a part of your life were the Polish traditions and customs you write about?

A. Everyone in the family down to my father spoke Polish (my mother understood it, "could get by," she says). When I was a kid, weddings meant a polka band, and holidays meant my dad would be in the basement listening to the Buffalo Bills or Sabres game on the radio while he made his own kielbasa by hand. In the early 1990s, Charles Keil wrote a great book on the Polish American music scene in Buffalo, *Polka Happiness*, and sure

enough, even my elementary-school basketball coach was in there with his band. Ditto with Milton Rogovin's incredible photo-documentary book with Michael Frisch, *Portraits in Steel*, which was shot in part at the Bethlehem Steel Plant where my grandfather worked in the roll mill. I often think that if Studs Terkel had been on the radio in Buffalo, my family might have made it into the pages of *Working*.

Q. Were your parents labor activists?

A. No, not at all. My dad was active in his union for many years, but not in a take-to-the-streets kind of way—though he was his union's vice president for more than fifteen years. And my mother always worked nonunionized service-sector jobs. My grandparents were dues-paying members of the United Steelworkers of America, the Teamsters.

Q. As a kid, what did you think you'd be when you got older?

A. I worked most of the 1980s at a Wendy's restaurant (until it closed and I had to go on unemployment) and at a gas station (until I got held up). During that time I got a two-year degree in computer science at Erie Community College, eventually got a B.A. in English, and wrote lyrics for and sang in several bands that played punk clubs in Buffalo (The Continental), Toronto (Larry's Hideaway and the Cameron Public House), and elsewhere.

Q. How did you get into poetry?

A. I went to the M.F.A. program at Bowling Green State University, outside of Toledo, simply because my college Latin professor in Buffalo had gone there for graduate school and told me they had a program where you could write and teach (as a teaching assistant) and they'd pay you. He'd heard that I was a songwriter for punk bands and liked my translations of Catullus. I could tell my band wasn't going to get signed to a label (though several other bands from Buffalo emerged at that time: 10,000 Maniacs, Goo Goo Dolls), and I was on unemployment from the

restaurant, so I went. There, I started producing chance-generated texts and organizing "community open shares" outside of the university, a public space for those in and outside of the college community to come together and share creative work. But to make a long story short, a poetry professor there at the time tried to force me out of the program (I eventually threatened to bring in the ACLU). I took "correspondence" courses my entire second year, as he had barred me from his two required graduate workshops, and most important for my own development and future work, I spent much of that year teaching poetry in the local public schools.

Q. What were the "community open shares"?

A. Early on at Bowling Green, I made friends with a graduate student in the music department, Wayne Berman. We had the same tastes in music—electronic, experimental—and a sorely undertheorized cultural anarchism. Wayne had been a student of Ben Boretz in Music Program Zero at Bard, and we were both interested in "language as a music" (which was also the title of a festival we put on our second year, inviting guest composers like Kenneth Gaburo to northwest Ohio). With the community open shares, we were simply trying to establish social spaces away from the university campus where people could test out new works that existed, or attempted to exist, somewhere between text and sound. Some people performed music. At the time, I was experimenting with chance-generated polyvocal texts that could be performed by choruses of speakers.

Q. Two things stand out to me about these "open shares": you were trying to establish social spaces away from the university campus, and you were experimenting with polyvocal texts, both of which represent pretty enduring traits in your work. Why have those concerns been important to you?

A. On the first point: I grew up in a working-class neighborhood, an ethnic enclave. All my neighbors were Polish or Italian bricklayers, steelworkers, retail workers, autoworkers. And this is something that's part of my conversations with every orga-

nization doing labor educational or cultural programming: the physical and geographical spaces of higher education scare the public away. Workers from neighborhoods like mine simply won't drive out to the university, worry about getting lost, worry about not knowing where to park, worry about not being accepted. So we need, more and more, to affiliate and collaborate with local union halls, public libraries, local public schools, etc. On the second point: quite simply, I think, I was "trained" not as a poet but as an electronic musician. The idea of polyphony, of multitrack recording, of producing cultural-aesthetic-political work on multiple channels (with multiple instruments or voices) is how I first learned to make art.

Q. I want to come back to the idea of polyphony later. Something you said about the university triggered some thoughts. I've recently read Joan Shelley Rubin's *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America*, in which Rubin documents the myriad public uses of poetry in the American past. The kinds of places where poetry mattered were far more diverse than today's universities—precisely the kinds of places you talk about moving lectures into. It seems to me that as some of the historical "uses" of poetry that Rubin describes have withered, the audience for much American poetry is more narrow and academic than ever before. Who do you see as your audience?

A. I'd first say that Rubin's argument seems very particular to the U.S. When I visited the recuperated factories in Argentina in 2004, for example, the offices at Zanon in Neuquén had up posters for performances of Bertolt Brecht at the factory. And at the recuperated Industrias Metalúrgicas y Plásticas Argentina factory in Buenos Aires, cultural groups who had helped defend the workers' occupation of the factory had established spaces inside where workers, during breaks or after work, could take a yoga or dance class, watch a film, create paintings or sculptures, etc. Likewise, when I was doing poetry workshops in 2006 with Ford autoworkers at plants in Port Elizabeth and Pretoria and with the labor education wing of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, I found a rich interest in poetry among the work-

ers, some of whom were practiced *imbongi* (a traditional Zulu or Xhosa poet) who still recited traditional Zulu or Xhosa poems at weddings, funerals, and other family/community gatherings. My own work, maybe going back to the community open shares in northwest Ohio in the late 1980s but more pointedly during the past decade—when I've staged my plays at union halls and at rallies for striking Northwest Airlines mechanics and cleaners, led "poetry dialogues" at Ford plants in the U.S. and South Africa, and found myself more and more being invited to read at places like the Institute for Policy Studies in D.C. or labor history speakers' series at public libraries—seeks to move beyond "poetry" as an ever more institutionalizing art form and, in a sense, open up its production and reception to the public, to the working world.

Q. Do you have an explanation for what it is about the structure of American cultural life that institutionalizes or closes down the production and reception of poetry and the other arts? Why are the arts better integrated into working lives in places like Argentina and South Africa?

A. My one-word answer? Neoliberalism.

Q. How so?

A. In various readings of the neoliberal—David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* is the one I turn to the most—"intellectual property" is part of that. You can see it even in the provisions of trade agreements like NAFTA and DR-CAFTA [Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement]. Yet I believe it's something more overarching and potentially more ominous: a general trajectory of both the conservative and the liberal toward massive privatization, trade liberalization, financialization, etc., whose endgame, some theorists believe, is the complete eradication of what I've taken to calling the first-person plural. No more collectives, no more unions (remember Reagan and Thatcher)—only individual consumers. And so my own poetic-political response to that has been to try, as much as pos-

sible, to create local and global spaces for the collective, the "we," to exist.

Q. Maybe this is a good time to return to the idea of polyphony you mentioned earlier. One of the things that impressed me most when I saw you read were the film clips you shared of the collaborative poetry workshops you led with autoworkers at various Ford plants around the world. The simultaneous use of multiple voices also seems closely linked to your method of composition. A few sections in *Revenants* feature less conventional, collage-type poems in which you combine ethnography, textbooks, and snippets from conversations, and this technique has become a bigger part of your last two books, in which you've braided many distinct voices into spaces where, as you put it, the collective is allowed to exist. How does this practice relate to your view of "authorship"?

A. I'm less and less interested in single authorship and more and more interested in the potential for new forms of collaboration. Working with photographer Ian Teh on *Coal Mountain Elementary* pushed me further in this, and my new project, which I'm initiating together with the International Trade Union Confederation in Belgium, is pushing me another step further. I'd like to see myself, and be seen, more as a facilitator or creator of new spaces or communities than as a solitary "author" of individual books. I feel like each and every day I'm learning something more about dependency (i.e., depending on others), affiliation (i.e, subordinating, reconfiguring, or rescaling my individual aesthetic goals to also encompass the needs of unions, working people, social movements, etc.), and community.

Q. When it comes to our common participation in and with language, your ideas of collaboration and the creative repurposing of other people's speech also seem linked in form and in spirit to the Negativland and Afrika Bambaataa projects you liked as a kid growing up, or the contemporary work of people like Danger Mouse or Girl Talk.

A. All that work has been very important to me.

Q. What you're describing sounds like a decommodification of artistic and personal relationships: the kind of artistic collaboration you're describing is very different from a wage-labor or contract model of production or exchange. In your *Virginia Quarterly Review* essay "Notes toward an Anticapitalist Poetics," you ask, "Where are the poems in dialogue with . . . global people's movements? Where are the poems bridging and building transnational social and aesthetic networks of alternative and agitational modes of grammar and syntax, revolutionary poetic critiques of corporate culture (the contemporary complement to Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*)?" What shape do you see these relationships taking in your most recent work?

A. At the heart of my recent work is an attempt to address a dichotomy: that while corporations, the corporate elite, and politicians regularly have the opportunity under globalization to engage in transnational and multinational conversations, working people rarely, if ever, have such an opportunity to talk. While an executive at Ford or Dell or Nike or Coke can pick up the phone (or board an airplane) for a business meeting with his colleagues at Ford or Dell or Nike or Coke in Germany, Japan, South Africa, or anywhere else in the world, the working people who produce those cars or computers or cans of soda have no such opportunities to converse. And this produces a clear and distinct advantage of power in, for example, the conditions of work and contract negotiations, to cite only two areas. My experiences have taught me about the tremendous desire in working people, both in the U.S. and abroad, to know more about the working and everyday lives of people doing the same jobs as them in other places around the world. So on the one hand, I want to create books like *Coal Mountain Elementary* in which the lives of miners in Sago, West Virginia, and Fuxin, China, are separated by nothing more than the spine of the book—where the stories of their tragedies, unique yet too painfully in common, enter into a conversation in one particular space. On the other hand, I am also working to build on-the-ground relationships through the "poetry dialogues" (poems from which have been published in newsletters of the participating unions for all

members to read—which, in the case of South Africa, is a readership of 100,000 or more members), through new projects that will produce new conversations about service-sector jobs on a global scale, and through my Coal Mountain blog that serves as a site for people in mining communities (and others) to learn about the global scale of the human and environmental devastation within the mining sector.

Q. I'm glad you bring up the environmental devastation. One of my early childhood memories is seeing the Bingham Canyon Mine in Utah, which, I believe, was the largest hole ever made in the earth by human beings. In addition to the way unsafe mining practices damage human lives, what is mining doing to the natural environment in the places where it's based?

A. The list is almost too long to go through here: destruction of wildlife habitat, collapse of established ecosystems, permanent (negative) remapping of the soil's genetic profile, long-term pollution of the region's water, etc. Though *Coal Mountain* is obviously a book about the human tragedy of mining, that link between working people and the environment was also something I felt needed to be clearly articulated in the book. Ian's photograph of a billboard displaying a vibrant, lush landscape of green fields and blue skies that was put up in a barren mining landscape of sterile earth and gray skies, as well as the story of a Chinese village's founding myth and the environmental devastation the mining industry has wrought upon the village, a story that opens "Third Lesson," would be two clear examples of this. I'd argue that mountaintop-removal mining, as it rips through communities in West Virginia and Kentucky—and the ecological havoc left in its wake—is one of the more pressing environmental concerns in the States today. Silas House's coedited volume, *Something's Rising: Appalachians Fighting Mountaintop Removal*, is a great contribution to understanding this issue. Unfortunately, these stories repeat themselves across the globe on a daily basis. Just this morning I was reading a report on how coal exploitation is threatening the local ecology in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, an area where, just a few years ago, scientists discovered dozens of new animal and plant species.

Q. One of the things that strikes me most profoundly about *Coal Mountain Elementary* is not just how our consumer demands link us inextricably to people living and working around the globe. It occurs to me that it may not have even been possible for you to have written *Coal Mountain Elementary* before the age of Internet connectivity, since much of its material was culled from the global information web. Can you speak a bit about the ways that you've used new technologies in your more recent work?

A. Ed Park, a novelist and editor at *The Believer*, probably captured it best in his short review of *Coal Mountain Elementary*: "something with the energy of a link-rich website and the beautiful, horrible inevitability of a book." That's what I was going for, that liminal space between the technologies (because a book is certainly one, too). Same with my blog—I want to continue the voice of those *CME* news reports into the (ongoing) present. In the past few days, for example, my blog updates have included a terrible accident in which a Zambian river sand miner, Beauty Ngwelengwe, and her seven-month old son barely survived a highway accident while bringing the efforts of her labor to market, as well as a tin mine collapse in the Congo which killed six miners, five of them children. The day before these entries, twelve miners died in a coal-mine fire in China's Jiangxi Province. Technology opens the door for me to be vigilant in documenting the incessant human tragedies and horrors of this industry.

Q. I want to ask more specifically about your formal documentary strategy. With *Shut Up Shut Down*, for example, I've heard you say that you were playing with the Marxist idea of base/superstructure. What did you have in mind with the formal structure of *Coal Mountain Elementary*?

A. The new book was my attempt, I'd say, to imagine a poetic form for certain tendencies in social movement unionism, particularly as it opened to transnationalism.

Q. Structurally, the book presents itself as a series of lessons, and each section begins with a short overview of the lesson's

"objectives." Were those taken verbatim from the American Coal Foundation lesson plans?

A. Yes. I tried to imagine my daughter's school using these lessons, and the kind of conversation we might have if she came home from second or third grade and said, "I learned about coal mining today." *And unions?* Huh? *The effects on the environment?* What? *Miners dying every day in every corner of the world?* They do? Luckily my daughter is much, much smarter than the kids the American Coal Foundation must have imagined they would indoctrinate.

Q. When these lesson objectives are interspersed with the accounts of the Sago disaster and the litany of Chinese mining fatalities, they take on a second, heavily ironized bent. For instance, the three lessons announce that we're intended to "observe the process of crystallization" while practicing a "historic" craft among coal-mining families; learn "the costs associated with the mining of coal"; and "focus on the relationship between coal companies and the miners and their families," but the reader's idea of "the costs associated with the mining of coal" end up being far different from those intended by whatever corporate executive signed off on those lesson plans.

A. When I started reading the testimonies of the Sago miners who survived the explosion and the rescue-team members who went in and tried to save those who were trapped underground, the words simply broke my heart. I kept hearing these men (they were all men that day) struggle desperately for language, for words; I kept hearing their vulnerability, their inability to say "died" or "dead"—their sentences in the testimonies regularly trail off into an ellipsis when they approach one of those words. I went through over six-thousand pages of that testimony and tried to locate the story (or, more accurately, one version of what happened at Sago). But I imagined this Sago storyline, with its strong narrative drive forward, embedded in a swirl of other stories: reports of Chinese mine disasters that seem relentless and never ending; lessons that begin and end, only to have another insidious lesson begin again; photos that alternate

between West Virginia and China. One would be left with one story that drove straight ahead, one that kept repeating, another that went around in circles, and another (the photos) that alternated back and forth. That convergence of trajectories was my attempt to capture the agonizing inner anguish and torment we all feel when we confront tragic, unfathomable loss.

Q. That sense of loss permeates the entire book: it opens with a recently widowed Chinese miner's wife announcing that she has no language for her feelings and ends with a deeply stirring coda (an AP news story detailing the suicides of John Boni and William Chisolm, two men who had been working at the Sago mine on the day of the incident) that presents a strikingly similar situation in which another middle-aged miner's wife, Vicki Boni, talks about the suicide of her ex-husband and her father's death in a coal-mining accident when she was a teenager. There's a clear insinuation of the reverberating consequences of these disasters. Repeated tragic, unfathomable loss is a kind of "slow violence," to use a phrase of Rob Nixon's, against individuals and whole communities. What's the coda's "lesson"?

A. After it was discovered that the trapped miners, except for Randal McCloy, were not alive (as had been reported on the news and communicated to the families across the street from the mine at the Sago Baptist Church), Anderson Cooper and Geraldo Rivera and all the news crews and journalists packed up their belongings and left. But that tragedy didn't leave, couldn't leave. Tragedy stays. It seeps into people's bones and lungs and spirit and psyche. And the coda structurally signifies that heartbreaking, lingering reverberation. A few months after the book was published, I attended a lecture by Howard Zinn where he spoke about these types of reverberations during and after war, about how the official number of dead from the Vietnam War, for example, doesn't include the many, many soldiers who committed suicide after returning home. *Coal Mountain Elementary*'s coda—as well as my almost daily posting of global mining tragedies on the blog—is meant to remind us of those reverberations, to not allow us to leave, to keep us continually facing the tragedies.

Q. While the news media may have left quite abruptly once they learned that the story didn't meet their standards, there's a note in the beginning of the book that indicates that you traveled to Elkins, West Virginia, a few weeks after the tragedy. Did you know at that time that you wanted to write a book like this one?

A. A few weeks after the Sago disaster, I received an invitation from the English department at Davis and Elkins College (about a half hour from the Sago mine) to be a visiting writer for a week. While in Elkins, I led creative-writing workshops for both students and community members—and of course the recent tragedy was on people's minds (and in their pens). I also drove around a great deal, and many of my photos in the book came out of this trip. A year later, after I'd worked the testimonies into what was then more of a documentary play, the theater department at Davis and Elkins asked to do a staged reading of it. When the book came out in the spring of 2009, I was invited back for their writers' week, and students and community members made *Coal Mountain Elementary* their spring play. They performed it for several weeks at the Boiler House Theater on campus and took it on the road, performing it at the University of Pittsburgh's Black Box Theater and at a small performance space/café in Sutton, West Virginia. It should go without saying that without the support of that community in Elkins, this book probably would never have been produced.

Q. So community members were cast in the speaking parts of the play when it was first performed? That must have been deeply affective for many people.

A. It was. And when several relatives of the miners who died that day came out to the performances and stayed around afterwards to talk to the director, the cast, and myself—that was, quite simply, one of the most profound moments of my writing life.

Q. What did these audience members want to talk about after watching the play?

A. Well, for the relatives, it was about how difficult it was to sit through again, but how accurate it was. How they were happy

that, unlike with the mainstream media, with this book, what happened at the mine wasn't going to be forgotten.

Q. This wasn't the first time that you'd adapted some of your work for the stage. Didn't you do the same thing with some sections from *Shut Up Shut Down*?

A. Yes, two serial pieces in that book have been staged: "Francine Michalek Drives Bread" premiered at the UAW Local 879 union hall in St. Paul and was later done by Torn Space Theater in Buffalo; "Capitalization" won a project development grant from Stage Left Theatre in Chicago, who first put it up. Later, it was put on by the Cleveland Public Theatre. When the Northwest Airlines mechanics and cleaners went on strike, they asked to have a section of it performed at one of their rallies.

Q. Are you thinking while you're writing about dramatic adaptation or how something would play on stage?

A. I think it's inherent whenever you're working with multiple voices, with speech acts, be it ethnographic interviews (like in *Revenants*), archival sources (as in *Shut Up*), or testimonies (as in *Coal Mountain*). The voice wants to speak, to converse, to engage. German documentary theater, especially Peter Weiss's post–*Marat/Sade* work for the stage, was definitely an influence on these works. Likewise Anna Deavere Smith.

Q. You're talking about poetry as being invitational by nature, the use of voice as an instrument of inclusion—an almost liturgical call to participation. Is that a fair observation?

A. I've never really thought about it as liturgical, but as a call to participation, absolutely.

Q. I know that Adrienne Rich and Amiri Baraka have been important to you and your work. Baraka even wrote an afterword to *Shut Up Shut Down*. In fact, this call to participation reminds me of both Albert Gelpi's remark that every gesture of Rich's "insists on the connection between language and action, the power of the word to testify to and so change the world we

live in and share" and that stirring invitation to "come / on in" that concludes Baraka's poem "SOS."

A. Adrienne and Amiri have both been tremendous influences on my writing and my poetics. Fifteen years ago, when I began collecting writings for the inaugural issue of *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics*, Amiri was the very first person I asked to send me poems: three of his pieces lead off *XCP* no. 1. As for him writing an afterword for *Shut Up*, that's an interesting story. When Coffee House decided they were going to bring the book out, I asked him if he'd be willing to write a blurb. For quite a while I didn't hear back from him, and my publisher was getting anxious: "Is the blurb coming from Amiri?" So I emailed him and said, "I know you're incredibly busy but . . ." and that night I got an email back from him: "I'll be sending you the introduction to your book tomorrow." I was completely floored—and honored—that someone like Amiri would see something in my work worthy not only of a blurb but the entire piece he wrote. Adrienne has, similarly, been incredibly supportive of my writing projects—and the piece you quote from above, "Notes toward an Anti-Capitalist Poetics," is actually something I wrote on her later essay collections for a special symposium on her work. I am so thankful for their writings, individually and taken together, which have taught me so much about poetic composition, the larger public/social positions a poet can engage . . . that connection between language and action that Gelpi lays out. Amiri and Adrienne are, quite simply, two of the key progenitors of my own poetic practice.

Q. All this makes me curious about your composition practice. When you're conducting interviews, or scouring the archive, or poring over testimonies, what's the seed that triggers a response from you? Could you explain the construction of one of your poems or books?

A. OK. I think "Capitalization" in *Shut Up Shut Down* might serve as a good example. I'd found an interview with a woman who tried to organize her Westinghouse plant in Pittsburgh during McCarthyism, and a small section of that interview stuck in

my head as something that could be used in a one-act play. My father had gone to Pittsburgh fairly frequently when I was a kid, for his position in the Westinghouse union. So her story also had some biographical/historical interest for me. I regularly have three voices in my pieces—an attempt to transcend the dialectic, to triangulate so one voice can't be pitted directly against a second but always has to be in relation to two others. And I started thinking about my father's attitude toward Reagan. My dad was one of those Reagan Democrats who almost immediately regretted his decision, especially when Reagan started firing the PATCO workers. So I started researching the PATCO strike and came up with some incredible details, especially the "are you now, or have you ever been, a member of PATCO" quote which fused Reagan and the HUAC era. But for the longest time I couldn't find that third "voice." Several months later, I was asked to chair a "writing across the curriculum" committee at the community college where I was teaching, and one of our assignments was to find a new writing handbook for the students. So on my desk I had dozens of these handbooks. And I had no idea how I was going to compare so many of them. So I started putting Post-it notes in particular chapters. Run-on sentences, my students always had problems with those—one Post-it in every handbook's run-on sentence chapter. Subject-verb agreement, same thing. *Capitalization*. And it was like a bell was rung. I started reading the rules of capitalization and I could hear them triangulated with the Reagan and Westinghouse stories. But it wasn't quite right. I asked a colleague of mine if she had an old handbook from the early or mid 1980s. I remember her saying, "Why would you want one of those for our students? It'll be out of print!" I told her it was for another project, and sure enough, she had a copy of Margaret Shertzer's *The Elements of Grammar*. I turned to the capitalization chapter and the examples were all from a cold-war-era handbook. That night, I started putting these three voices together. I worked for maybe thirty-six straight hours and finished the seventeen-part sequence in one sitting.

Q. That's quite a story. Is it representative of your composition method, or more of an outlier?

A. I think it's fairly representative. I often don't "write" for long periods. Then one story will get stuck in my head and I can't shake it. Both the Westinghouse-McCarthyism story and what happened at the Sago mine would be examples—though the Sago story eventually required going through those six-thousand-plus pages of testimony. I'll try for some time to pair one story with a second, testing it (in my head) to see if it holds. It usually doesn't. This is a fairly research-heavy period until I find what feels to be the perfect second voice. The third voice typically comes as a flash—the capitalization chapter, stumbling across the lesson plans that I use in *Coal Mountain*.

Q. I'm especially interested in your affinity for three voices. It reminds me both of Emmanuel Levinas's description of how the ethical relationship with the Other becomes transformed by the arrival of another Other and of some of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about polyphony, heteroglossia, and dialogism.

A. Those theories certainly played a role—reading Bakhtin, Voloshinov, etc. But I think it really goes back to being a musician, seeing Run-D.M.C. and Grandmaster Flash in the early 1980s. Two microphones and a turntable. Creating audio montages with a Roland synthesizer, an E-mu Drumulator, and my (distorted) voice. Even Nullstadt, the Buffalo band I wrote about in my essay for *Goth: Undead Subculture*, was a three-piece outfit. I guess, from the very beginning, I learned to make art in threes.

Q. You also frequently incorporate another element through your use of documentary photography—I'm hesitating over whether to call it a voice or not. The photographs make for beautiful books, particularly the full-color images in *Coal Mountain Elementary*, but there's clearly more going on here than simple aesthetics. How did you start using photographs in your work?

A. There were two strains of influence when I began the photo-documentary pieces in *Revenants*: WPA-era phototexts like Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* and the industrial taxonomies of German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. Since then, everyone from Milton Rogovin and Sebastião Salgado to Allan

Sekula, Catherine Opie, and Alfredo Jaar has influenced my work. Earlier I used the phrase "convergence of trajectories" to describe how these varied voices come together. The photographs provide yet another axis or node within this convergence, another counterpoint to the triangulation of the voices, a wall or a window or a mirror upon which the texts are projected, viewed, and reflected/refracted.

Q. I like that description of the image as a site of projection or reflection. For me, the most vivid instance is the photograph on page 93 of *Coal Mountain Elementary*. The facing page quotes a local taxi driver saying, "the sadness not only haunts the city today, what has happened will haunt the city for years to come," and then we see an almost surreal image—a bleak, industrial city space, a plume of white steam in the background, and a haunting, pale figure dressed in black walking into the foreground of the image. It was probably the most memorable image I saw all of last year.

A. I agree. When Ian sent me that image, I really struggled with its placement because it was *so* overpowering. If it came too early in the book, it would overpower the images yet to come; if it came at the end of the book, it would feel too much (to me) like forced poetic closure—that lyrical, desperate power chord with which far too many poems end. The image appears now at almost the exact midpoint in the book, a foil to that double use of "haunt" in the text on the facing page. When I asked Ian about the photo, he told me that the man in the foreground is retired and lives in coal mine number 2 just outside the city of Datong. The mines in China have residential buildings, and sometimes there are villages nearby where the miners live. Quite often the family, including the grandparents, live in one home, so it's not uncommon to see children and pensioners wandering around on the grounds of the mine.

Q. It seems fitting that the idea and image of haunting would occur at the center of the volume, in that haunting has long been a central concern for you. Your first book was even named *Revenants*, evoking figures of the walking dead. A passage from *Shut*

Up Shut Down also comes to mind—your description of a factory where "everybody at that table, there must have been seven or eight people, had a finger or something missing." You've focused your attention on documenting some of the more painful death throes of deindustrialization in the United States. I'd like to turn to a pointed question you ask in your 2006 essay "Notes toward an Anticapitalist Poetics": "As the U.S. economy transitions from a modernist manufacturing economy to late capitalism's service economy, what would a service economy poetry and poetics look like, and who among us is prepared to step forward and imagine it?" How do you think this question is being answered?

A. I'm not sure that it's even been sufficiently addressed to date, let alone answered. As deindustrialization reaches further and further into the global infrastructure, decimating communities, a more and more precarious service sector emerges in its wake. We need a poetics that can address this, that can rescale from the local to the global and back again, that can read and speak to (and speak with) the proliferation of payday loan outfits, dollar stores, and rent-to-owns that open in the spaces abandoned by the American manufacturing sector—and the workers

transitioned from union jobs in the factories to minimum-wage jobs in the strip malls. We need a poetics that can encompass the "Made in China" objects at the Walmarts of the global North, the maquiladora-esque conditions of their production in the global South, the carnage in the Chinese coal mines that powers the factories that produce these goods, and the trade agreements that sanction the entire system. I'm not yet sure what that poetics will be. I only know my own ongoing commitment in trying to create it.