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SUBJECTS OF ECONOMY:
SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY POETICS AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY OF WORK

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Michelle B. Gaffey

December 2020

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Michelle B. Gaffey

2020

SUBJECTS OF ECONOMY:

SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY POETICS AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY OF WORK

By

Michelle B. Gaffey

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ABSTRACT

SUBJECTS OF ECONOMY:

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By

Michelle B. Gaffey

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Dissertation supervised by Dr. Linda Kinnahan

Although the term “documentary” originated in film and photography studies, it has been used to describe a range of compositional and research strategies in discussions of twentieth and twenty-first century poetry as well. A study of such documentary poetics, however, requires us to distinguish between documentary poetics in general and social documentary poetics in particular. To illustrate this distinction, I discuss five contemporary books of poetry and photographs: C.D. Wright’s and Deborah Luster’s *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*, Cynthia Hogue’s and Rebecca Ross’s *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina*, Chris Llewellyn’s *Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911*, Mark Nowak’s *Shut Up Shut Down*, and Mark Nowak’s and Ian Teh’s *Coal Mountain Elementary*. In every case, the poets and photographers participate in working-class memory-building and engage

with various subjects of economy as they participate in the tradition of the social documentary book. They demand that readers interact with the poetry and images to make sense of the complex juxtapositions of documents, and this interaction implies the construction of a community, a forging of connections between disparate parts. The self-reflexive and other-directed approaches in these texts signal, however imperfectly, a desire to [per]form a collectivity in and through the written word, thereby positing an overall strategy for composition—textual solidarity—which models how we might confront the alienating effects of global capitalism and the divisive “isms” that it both requires and reinforces.

DEDICATION

for Jayra and Jennifer

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Finally, I am grateful to the archivists, publishers, poets, photographers, and estate managers for their permission to include poetry excerpts and photographs in this dissertation:

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Preface:

Engaging the Paradox: The Impossible Task of Representing Suffering

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement...

A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.

~ James Agee, "Preamble," *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

In the early stages of this project I met with my writing group to discuss a brief excerpt from what is now my second chapter. Toward the end of our meeting, one of my readers asked me several challenging questions about my overall project, which explores contemporary photo-poetic collaborations in the tradition of the social documentary book. Essentially, her questions boiled down to the following: “Are there ethical problems with the actual production of the books you’re investigating for your project?” “Who has the right to transmit the stories and images of people who experience suffering?” “Are there ethical problems with your overall project given that you remove the lived experiences of real human beings even further from their original context when you talk about them in a critical mode?”

The short answer to these questions is simple: Yes, the social documentary book tradition is both vexed and vexing. Yes, it is often a problem that people try to speak on behalf of others who experience suffering, disaster, and trauma. Yes, I often agonize over the fact that I intellectualize the work of books that represent—through various media—the lived, traumatic experiences of human beings. But my writing group’s questions, as well as our shared concern with the impossible task of representing suffering, are not new. In his preamble to the iconic, New Deal-era *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—in many ways the quintessential documentary book that follows the stories of men, women, and children in the rural South—James Agee anticipates these ethical concerns and seemingly contemporary questions when he suggests that his own work might “obscure” the most “important” reality of all:

...namely, that these I will write of are human beings, living in this world, innocent of such twistings as that which are taking place over their heads; and that they were dwelt among, investigated, spied on, revered, and loved, by other quite monstrously alien human beings, in the employment of still others still more alien; and that they are now

being looked into by still others, who have picked up their living as casually as if it were a book, and who were actuated toward this reading by various possible reflexes of sympathy, curiosity, idleness, et cetera, and almost certainly in a lack of consciousness, and conscience, remotely appropriate to the enormity of what they are doing. (10)

In the opening pages of his book, Agee doubts his ability to convey the truth and mystery of human *being*. As Robert Coles elaborates in *Doing Documentary Work*, Agee worries “that any manuscript he will complete...won’t convey so very much what matters about the lives of the people he has met, and...that his readers won’t realize that to be the case” (Coles 3).

Throughout this text, Agee repeatedly agonizes over the inadequacy of his work to fully capture the lived experiences of the materially impoverished, yet “enviously noble,” individuals and families he met in the South, thereby anticipating the semiotic concerns with representation that take theoretical root in the late twentieth century; thus, our contemporary concern with the inadequacy of language’s ability to capture the essence of a moment is not entirely new.

However, our current era is distinguishable from the 1930s in that it is now common knowledge within academia that language and photographs cannot truly represent reality, that there is no adequate substitute for experience itself. In addition, many contemporary scholars suggest that they can make no claims to objectivity, that the effort to “go out and objectively record what one sees” is, in fact, impossible.

We are thus not unfamiliar with the questions asked by my writing group, as concerns about representation—how to do it, who can do it, what media is best for it, when is the best time for it—have been of particular interest among academics for the past fifty years, and were anticipated in the documentary work of the 1930s. My short answers to the questions are also not new: we know that a representation of a person or an experience is not the person or experience

itself, and when we talk about experiences of historical or personal trauma, the representations are even more troubling, as an individual is re-packaging the experience, often in the name of art, assuming that the experience *can be* packaged. The act of representing trauma is further problematized when an individual not part of the affected group attempts to speak on behalf of those who have experienced the trauma.

The question, then, becomes, “What are we to do?” Do we *not* speak of suffering and tragedy because, in doing so, we risk relegating the subjects to Unreality, as if they are part of a movie script? Do we *not* write because, in doing so, we attempt to package experiences in language that are beyond the speech act? Do we *not* photograph because, in doing so, we are mere voyeurs, saddened by another’s unfortunate circumstances, yes, but also disengaged, “never lifting a finger” to minister to or stand in solidarity with the suffering individual?

The answer, from my perspective, is no. We *must* speak, write, and photograph. As I told my writing group, we have an ethical responsibility to *do the imperfect*, to take the risk with language and other modes of representation. But we must always ask ourselves *how* to speak, write, and photograph. Thus, I am interested in the “paradoxical impossibility and simultaneous necessity to represent, to communicate, [and] to speak of suffering” (Schweizer 3), and in how individual texts work through this paradox—and why they do it. My project ultimately engages this “paradoxical impossibility” as it reflects upon the rhetorical and aesthetic strategies at work in contemporary books of social documentary poetry and photographs that are informed by the need for internationalist textual solidarity as they engage with various subjects of economy. To introduce this discussion, I briefly reflect on the “doing” of documentary work, and I discuss the origins of the word “documentary,” which establishes the foundation for my thesis and research

parameters. In Chapter 1, I then more fully outline the shifting definitional parameters of “documentary” in discussions about contemporary poetry and poetics.

Introduction:

Documentary: It's in the Doing

The immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera, and the printed word.

...the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense.

~ James Agee, "Preface," *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

A few years ago, I was teaching a poetry course in which I introduced students to figures who I described as “documentary” poets (including labor poets Chris Llewellyn and Jim Daniels). On more than one occasion, students were surprised by this body of poetry that self-consciously made use of and interacted with other documents, leading some students to remark, “I didn’t know that poetry could do this!” The actual phrasing of my students’ exclamations—they didn’t know poetry could *do* this—has left a lasting impression on me as a reader of poetry.

My students’ conception of documentary poetry as a *doing*, rather than as a neatly formed *thing*, is remarkably profound, and signals their understanding that the definition of this genre is ever-evolving and social in nature, that its forms will stretch and bend and swerve according to the needs of the poem and its historic moment. But my students’ grasp of the performative nature of poetry also echoes the often-exasperated expressions of documentarians in various fields who have resisted easy categorization of their own work, suggesting that any essentializing definition of “documentary” misses the point. In one way or another, documentarians agree that “documentary” is “in the doing.” Child psychologist Robert Coles, author of *Doing Documentary Work*, recounts an amusing conversation he had with William Carlos Williams as he pressed Williams to define “documentary.” Williams quipped: “Lots of streets to walk, lots of ways to walk them” (Coles 135), suggesting that no clear parameters or characteristics exist to define documentary, though his emphasis on ways of *walking* suggests that the focal point of any documentary study should be on the doing, on the actions undertaken to complete the work (we could say the same for poetry as well). While Williams refused to pin down a definition of “documentary,” he did elaborate on what the doing of it might/should look like:

“I’ll be standing at the store counter talking to that loud-mouthed pest who is trying to con me into buying something stupid that I’ll never need, and I should be enjoying the

fun of hearing him out—what a *line!*—but instead I demolish him in my mind with ideas, ethnic and sociological and psychological, and pretty soon it’s no fun for me, or for him either. I’ve forgotten him; he’s disappeared under the withering fire of my clever thinking. I’ve left him for another ball game!” (Coles 136)

By way of storytelling, Williams describes the need for any good documentarian to be fully present, for the observer to be truly engaged with the people, places, and events that are being observed. This active presence demands that the documentarian listen to the Other—not with a set of objectives or assumptions (though, perhaps with an awareness that such assumptions are unavoidable), but to truly listen and be mindful in the moment. Without such mindfulness, the documentarian will miss the spirit of the encounter and will instead focus solely on proving some predetermined point. In many ways, Williams reinforces what good research entails: careful listening, attention to detail, and an open mind and heart. As Coles concludes from his many conversations with Williams, we must “let the doing be a big part of the defining [of documentary]. Let us, that is, recount and depict, and thereby embody what we’re aiming to do and, yes, to be” (136). Coles reflects upon the importance of allowing the observed and the interviewed to act upon the documentarian to shape the project at hand, yes, but also to shape the observer. For a documentarian to convey this affective experience in writing or visual art, s/he must be fully present to feel the experience; otherwise, the “recount[ing] and depict[ing]” might possibly be pure fantasy or—worse—might include research data that is manipulated to fit some predetermined criteria or theory.

A brief history of the etymological roots of the word “documentary” will clarify and extend Williams’s refusal to commit to the word’s definitional parameters. “To document” in Latin – *docere* – literally means “to show” or “to teach.” In fact, our contemporary word “doctor” owes

its meaning to its old Latin root, as a “doctor” is a well-taught or learned person who is thus most qualified to teach. The English word “documentary” (as both an adjective and noun), however, is a relatively new term that, etymologically speaking, refers to a text that comprises or pertains to documents—“teacherly” materials. Coined in the 1920s, British filmmaker John Grierson borrowed from the French word *documentaire*, a word used to describe the expository nature of French travel films, to speak about “documentaries.” Grierson extended the standard definition of *documentaire* by suggesting that documentary filmmaking may or may not include or rely upon travel; most important is the effects of its *doing*: to focus on the film’s social (teacherly) use by documenting the “lives of cultural and ethnic others” as it creatively treats actuality (Gander 3). Grierson thus understood documentary filmmaking as explicitly didactic in nature; in the early 1930s, when Grierson began writing film criticism more regularly, he noted: “I look on cinema as a pulpit, and use it as a propagandist” (qtd. in Gander 3).

But when Grierson coined the word “documentary,” it was almost immediately a contested term, inspiring a range of questions among photographers and filmmakers alike, some of the same questions that I was asked in my writing group just a few years ago (and that Williams likewise received as well). These questions include: What is documentary? Who or what should be documented? Who has the right to do the documenting? Who and what is the documentary for? What ethical guidelines should inform documentary work?

The answers to these questions inspired debates even among the most revered photographers in the 1930s and 40s. Margaret Bourke-White—whose stunning and iconic photos of the Dust Bowl, American wars, and political leaders from the Soviet Union to India—suggested that “the manipulation of a scene, via object rearrangement, the use of props, unusual camera angles or sharp flashes, was acceptable in the pursuit of an image that dramatised actuality” (Gardner 11).

For Bourke-White, who was America's first known female war correspondent and whose photographs were published within *Life* magazine for two decades, staging a scene to convey the emotional truth—the *pathos*—of a moment fell under the purview of documentary work. Her contemporary Walker Evans, on the other hand, “advocated a ‘hands-off’ approach that documented the photographic subject without fabrication” (11), since he “understood documentary to mean the visual transmission of unadulterated reality” (11). While their philosophies of documentary photography differed, they both understood the value in evoking the “‘emotional’ and ‘sensory’ connection felt by the viewer of the image toward the subject photographed” (Gardner 12). In this sense, both Bourke-White and Evans—like poet William Carlos Williams—saw documentary as an “approach,” or a “doing.” The methods they used to do their documentary work are diverse, and questions surrounding these methods still surface today in discussions about poetry, poetics, and performance. “How do we do this work?” is still uttered, but added to this question in studies of contemporary poetics, which is my primary focus in this dissertation, is: “What materials and sources will we use?”

Thesis

The notion of documentary work as a *doing* is understood, embraced, and challenged throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in photography, film, and poetry studies. In my project, I consider the legacy of this contested term “documentary” to help me participate in the growing conversation about contemporary documentary poetry and poetics. I demonstrate how poets publishing during the rise of neoliberalism in the United States and those who publish into the twenty-first century engage the questions surrounding “documentary” that have persisted since the earliest use of the word. I further suggest that, in our conversations about contemporary poetry and poetics, we must distinguish between documentary poetics in general and social documentary poetics in particular, even as contemporary poets are aware of and informed by the decidedly social documentary projects of the 1930s and 40s. This distinction between documentary and social documentary in poetry studies is grounded on a shift in the poets’ approach: the encounter with a person, community or place—which was so often the source for early documentary work—has, for some poets, shifted to an encounter with already-produced information, a text. This shift from people, communities, or places to an already-produced document at times leads to a different set of questions and values that govern contemporary documentary poetry and poetics.

To ground this discussion I discuss five contemporary books of poetry and photographs that I argue move within the documentary book tradition of the 1930s and 40s: C.D. Wright’s and Deborah Luster’s *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*, Cynthia Hogue’s and Rebecca Ross’s *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina*, Chris Llewellyn’s *Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911*, Mark Nowak’s *Shut Up Shut Down*, and Mark Nowak’s and Ian Teh’s *Coal Mountain Elementary*. In every case, I see the poets and photographers engaging with issues of work and class—various “subjects of

economy.” While some of these poets embrace the initial spirit of the documentary tradition by going out into the world to record what they see, hear, and experience, as in the tradition of Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans, others shift their focus to material documents, still recording what they see, but beginning at the site of a text, rather at the site of a community of people. I argue that these poets’ and photographers’ keen and empathetic acts of listening and staging, as well as their narrative, appropriated, ekphrastic, and paratactic strategies of poetic composition, offer a unique intervention into contemporary social documentary poetic praxis. Their self-reflexive and other-directed approaches signal, however imperfectly, a desire to [per]form a collectivity in and through the written word. Further, these works posit an overall strategy for composition—textual solidarity—which models how we might confront the seemingly unassailable forces of capitalism and the divisive “isms” that it both requires and reinforces.

I ultimately argue that these select social documentary books of poetry and photographs intervene in and challenge the dominant neoliberal and global capitalist discourse about labor issues and the working class. They do this through their overall practice of textual solidarity, yes, but also through their liberation and construction of working-class memories. While these poets and photographers are aware of the potentially damaging aspects of representation, such as the risks of aestheticizing violence or making a spectacle of bodies in pain, they construct methods of doing documentary work and ways of speaking about working people that are not immediately consolidated into dominant power structures. They demand that readers engage with the poetry to make sense of the complex juxtapositions of documents, and this engagement implies the construction of a community, a forging of connections between disparate parts. My project explores how subtle changes in what is articulated, who articulates it, and when and how it is

articulated have the potential to shift the discursive structures that create and limit meaning and threaten the international working-class consciousness that is needed to challenge the alienating effects of global capitalism.

Research Parameters

The documentary texts of study in the following chapters tell a complexly real story about real people—especially people as working or working-class subjects. Such a focus on work and the working class is where the intersection between labor studies and documentary poetics begins in my project. Labor Studies, an inter- and multi-disciplinary academic field that intentionally bridges university classrooms and larger communities, draws from and explores a number of topics in economics, philosophy, sociology, political science, law, and literature to deepen our understanding of work and how it organizes our lives. The Department of Labor Studies at Indiana University—a leader in the field for over 50 years—acknowledges in its mission that the study of labor will:

increase [our] knowledge, understanding, and critical thinking about work and labor organizations within today’s global context; Examine the global socio-economic system and the impact of its inequalities on working people; Promote respect for workers and understanding of working class histories, experiences, perspectives and knowledge.

(“Department of Labor Studies”)

At the heart of labor studies, then, is a privileging of the stories about work and working-class lives even as it situates such stories in a larger, global economic context.

One logical extension of critical labor studies is a theoretical and material move toward international working-class solidarity. By “working-class solidarity,” I mean actions that authenticate, uplift, and listen to marginalized voices and events, especially as they pertain to injustice, oppression, or vulnerabilities experienced by working people. Solidarity suggests that we take a stand and answering the question, “Which side are we on?” It is movement beyond statements; it demands participation in concrete events in service of a particular cause or goal, which is often to challenge, change, or replace the systems that marginalize and oppress working

people. By “international” working-class solidarity, I borrow a definition from Aziz Rana, Professor of Law at Cornell University and contributor to *Jacobin Magazine*. Rana suggests that internationalism refers to a “vision of community, not based on race, gender, or nationality, but on treating workers or colonized peoples abroad—regardless of their ethnicity or citizenship—as engaged in the same freedom struggles over economic and political self-determination.” An internationalist approach is critical of anything that attempts to divide the global working class; this approach understands that the liberation of the working class in one part of the world is directly linked to this liberation in another part of the world.

But my project focuses on literary texts and their poetics, specifically on social documentary poetics and poetry about work. Thus, I borrow from the general understanding of political solidarity above to adopt the terms “textual solidarity” and “internationalist textual solidarity” to discuss how select poets and photographers “do” solidarity work *within* their documentary poetics. I consider *how* these artists *at the level of the text* or *in the production of their text* “authenticate, uplift, and listen to marginalized voices and events” that are experienced by working people, thereby inviting a reading experience which does the same. Of course, my use of “textual solidarity” and “internationalist textual solidarity” must be contrasted with German scholar Marike Janzen’s use of similar language in her important and innovatively-organized *Writing to Change the World: Anna Seghers, Authorship, and International Solidarity in the Twentieth Century* (2018). Janzen ultimately focuses on the concept of authorship in her study as she “argues for the continued relevance of international solidarity for making sense of the place of literary production in the world” (8). Her concept of social engagement centers on “how a writer intervenes in the apparatuses of production” (15), whereas I am concerned with how a

writer adopts certain *textual* strategies (or makes use of specific sources) to give rise to and model internationalist solidarity.

I likewise discuss the relational (anti-capitalist) compositional strategies that serve as a model for solidarity action for readers in the here-and-now. While these terms might be applied to a range of literary texts, my primary focus will remain on texts that explore various subjects of economy *and* that move within the social documentary book tradition. I see my project participating in the liberation of working-class memories in order to challenge the pernicious effects of global capitalism, as well as the neoliberal world order that has governed much of the world since the late twentieth century.

More specifically, in Chapters 2 and 3 I engage the field of labor studies and contemporary conversations about documentary poetics as I discuss the textual strategies at work in the poetry of select poets whose works have been published between the 1980s and the present. While many poems and books of poetry employ a social documentary poetic and even focus on the economy or work, as in *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* and *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina* (which I discuss in Chapter 1, Part 4), several factors impacted my decision to focus on the poetry of Chris Llewellyn and Mark Nowak so thoroughly in my final chapters:

- Their volumes of poems and photographs (*Fragments from the Fire*, *Shut Up Shut Down*, and *Coal Mountain Elementary*) each explore significant events in American labor history (the Triangle Fire of 1911, the closing of factories and rise of unemployment along the Rustbelt in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and the Sago Mine Disaster of 2006) and were published during critical moments in contemporary American working-class history (the anti-corporate globalization movement of the 1980s

and 90s, the extension of “free trade” policies in the 1990s, and the global recession of 2008).

- Both poets create decidedly documentary texts in that they source from local materials to craft their narrative, prose, and ekphrastic poems; still, Llewellyn’s poetry is often categorized as “neoformalist,” and she is thus absent from conversations about contemporary poetics. My project considers her work alongside one of the most frequently discussed contemporary social documentary poets (Mark Nowak) to demonstrate that “documentary” is not only a *doing* of the avant-garde.
- Likewise, both poets incorporate photographs throughout their volumes, a key feature of documentary books, which offer a literary and historical precedent to these volumes. And both poets expect their readers to inquire, investigate, mediate, reflect on their work, yes, but also to figure out how to act and effect change in the here-and-now.
- Important to me is that both poets do not merely speak *about* the working class; Llewellyn and Nowak are quintessential labor poets in that they identify as working-class writers; they are both poets, teachers, laborers, and activists who have “written from a variety of stances, not only inside but outside and alongside the working experiences described” in their poems (Oresick and Coles xxv); both Llewellyn and Nowak were raised in working-class families and continue to lead writing workshops with workers and incarcerated men and women, allowing their poems and poetics to be informed by the lived experiences of working people. Too, their poetry is used in service of working-class memory building and struggle when it is shared at union events; that is, it is language in action.

- Perhaps most relevant to my discussion in Chapters Two and Three, though, is that both poets employ rhetorical and aesthetic strategies to create internationalist textual solidarity, which distinguishes their poetics from other contemporary social documentary books of poetry, like *One Big Self* and *When the Water Came*. Llewellyn’s and Nowak’s poetics demonstrate an understanding that international working-class solidarity is necessary to advance the working class in the United States and across the globe; their textual politics stand opposed to the nationalist and protectionist politics of “buy American” campaigns and the misguided emphasis on charity or philanthropy to counter the effects of capitalism.

A number of dynamics contributed to the renewal of a documentary project in the late twentieth century, one that is rooted in the theoretical, political, and historical conversations and realities from the 1980s to the present. In the next sections, I briefly describe several key features of the past forty years that establish a context for my project’s focus on social documentary poetic representations of labor from the 1980s to the present.

The Neoliberal World Order and the Rise of the New Sweatshops

In the 1980s we began witnessing and experiencing the effects of nearly twenty years of global “free trade” agreements. Since the Kennedy administration began shipping garment work overseas in the 1960s, Americans have seen a shift in the materials produced in the United States. Once a center of industrial labor and production, the United States has since become a pinnacle of consumption and retail, particularly with the rise of corporate globalization and the outsourcing of production. We refer to the ideology at the root of such late-twentieth century practices as “neoliberalism,” which is characterized by:

trade liberalization and...the encouragement of exports; enticement of foreign investment; reduction of inflation; reduction of public spending; privatization of public services; deregulation of industry and finance; reduction and flattening of taxes; restriction of union organization; and, finally, enforcement of property and land ownership. (Bessner and Sparke)

These neoliberal trends and the effects of outsourcing were exacerbated in the 1980s with the presidency of Ronald Reagan and, as Robert J. S. Ross notes in *Slaves to Fashion*, “a shrinking federal government, deregulation, and privatization” (147). Faced with inflation and an increased federal deficit when he took the presidency in the 80s, Reagan, in the midst of the Cold War, “orchestrated the most vigorous expansion in the U.S. military budget since World War II” (Ross, R. 148). Perhaps ironically, the Reagan administration’s military spending created a national budgetary crisis with which administrations since the 80s have had to cope. The response, by Republicans and Democrats alike, has largely been to cut discretionary—mostly domestic—funding. Hundreds of thousands of federal jobs were cut over the course of the 90s, and many social services have been demonized and significantly cut from the federal budget (Ross, R. 149).

Thus, the struggles of late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century workers, labor leaders, and immigrants that helped lay the groundwork for the New Deal programs of the 1930s were forgotten and their victories slashed in the late twentieth century. Further, the rights of working people to organize independent labor unions and collectively bargain with their employers were threatened with Reagan’s presidential intervention in the 1981 Air Traffic Controller strike in which he declared the walkout unlawful. This “punitive war on the basic organizing rights of labor” was almost unimaginable at mid-twentieth century (Ross, A. 240). Reagan’s dictum,

combined with a weakened labor movement, increasing corporate globalization and privatization, government deregulation, cuts in domestic spending, and rises in unemployment, make the 1980s a significant and logical initial point of study of contemporary documentary poetry and poetics—a body of work that addresses issues of representation and labor.

Moreover, these particular characteristics of the 1980s, combined with a growing celebrity culture and sophisticated and manipulative advertising strategies, contributed to the rise of the “new sweatshops” in the United States and in developing nations. Corporate globalization, as well as the Reagan administration’s “commitment to suppressing leftist movements and left-wing elected governments in the Western Hemisphere...caused it to facilitate the planting of apparel suppliers in Central America” (Ross, R. 245). This aspect of foreign policy, which has continued since the 80s, has been referred to as “making sweatshops” by Ellen Rosen in her 2002 study, *Making Sweatshops: The Globalization of the U.S. Apparel Industry*. However, during the 1980s we also see the beginnings of the anti-corporate globalization movement, a force that grew throughout the 90s and into the twenty-first century at least as rapidly as various youth activist groups of the 1960s (Ross, R. 257-258). Importantly, the anti-corporate globalization movement, especially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, was closely aligned with labor unions and worked for international solidarity with workers abroad, especially in developing nations. Multiple forms of resistance to exploitative working conditions thus grew in the latter part of the twentieth century, beginning in the 1980s; I will suggest in my project that one of these forms of resistance is contemporary social documentary poetry and its poetics, and I will discuss at length the specifically internationalist poetry of two contemporary social documentary labor poets Chris Llewellyn and Mark Nowak in Parts Two and Three.

Language, Representation, and Power

In the 1980s we also see a deep interest in the power and limitations of language to construct meaning. Perhaps the most salient example of this is in the public conversations about Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, or AIDS. As Paula A. Treichler's 1987 publication, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," suggests, in the 1980s "the very nature of AIDS [was] constructed through language" (31). Drawing from the linguistic theories of Saussure, she argues that the repetition of ideas about AIDS actually created an "epidemic" of "signification...in which language organize[d] rather than label[ed] experience" and came to "seem 'natural' to us" (32), creating an illusion of an understanding of the matter at hand. She thus suggests that the absolute fear of gay men and people with AIDS in the 80s and 90s was primarily constructed through language. This fear and "epidemic" of linguistic signification that provided an imaginary justification for homophobia was further strengthened by the first label (linguistic representation) of the illness: Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, or GRID. Further, during the 80s, various social movements called attention to the ways that persons with AIDS were represented in the media: they were referred to as "victims" and were photographed and videotaped as pale, emaciated bodies withering in dark shadows. This "epidemic" of linguistic and technologically mediated signification exemplifies a key feature of poetry and poetics produced from the 1980s to the present. This body of work, albeit in various ways, often directly confronts the problematical elements of representation, calling attention to the violence that language, the media, photography, and television inflicts upon real human bodies. While my particular project will not address representations of persons with AIDS and will instead focus on representations of labor issues, Treichler's discussion reflects a strong

current in academia of the kinds of critical discussions about representation that were taking place in the 1980s.

Thus, by the 1980s, academic discourse about literary texts had moved beyond the New Critical frameworks and canonical projects of the first half of the twentieth century. Feminist Theories, Queer Theories, Post-colonial Theories, and Cultural Studies began consciously intervening in discussions of literature and literary representations of marginalized peoples, and writers, scholars, and critics were interrogating one of the most primal sites of representation: language. While the spoken and written word and its inability to adequately express and record human experience had been the attention of philosophers for centuries, and certainly of interest to various makers of literary modernism, the second half of the twentieth century saw increased and focused attention to questions of representation and objectivity. The “linguistic turn” that we see after WWII culminates in the experimental and language-oriented poetry we see emerge in the 1980s.

Technology and Formal Experimentation

Since the 1980s, technological developments in the computer and in digital imaging have significantly impacted the production of poetry and the ways in which readers are now able to relate to and access it. Likewise, the innovation of including cameras in cellular phones has drastically affected what is of documentary significance and the immediacy with which *anything* can be documented. The second decade of the twenty-first century saw an increase in these digital innovations and their social application. The speed with which ideas were shared online found a new home in the “smart” phone, a device that grew in popularity and accessibility around 2010. Now a feature of every household and pocket, the smart phone allows individuals

to access information—and to be bombarded with images—with the swipe of a finger. Also in 2010, image-sharing sites began taking over the internet with the development of Pinterest and Instagram, and these sites found their way to our phones when users began installing “apps” that would ensure the easy accessibility of both information and images. The more recent advent of online communication groups and databases, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Snap Chat, and the ability to access them almost immediately through the internet capabilities on the mobile phone, further impact the relationship between people, images, and claims to truth and reality.

The ease with which information has been shared since the end of the first decade of the new millennium contributed to Marjorie Perloff’s now-famous declaration that something about poetry changed on or about 2010 (echoing, of course, Virginia Woolf’s claim in her 1924 essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” that “On or about December 1910, human character changed”). In her *Unoriginal Genius*, Perloff notes that the “poetry of 2010 is...curiously different from that of 1990, even when its authors remain the same” (xi). She refers to works written on or after 2010 as “poetry by other means” (xii). In her first chapter she cites Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as the most prominent antecedent to the new poetics of the twenty-first century. She quotes at length from Edgell Rickword’s 1922 review from the *Times Literary Supplement*, concluding that his review is “an important document for anyone who wants to understand the poetry emerging in the twenty-first century. Rickword’s basic charge is quite clear: *citation*, especially citation that draws on other languages, undermines and destroys the very essence of poetry, which is (or should be) the expression of personal emotion—emotion conveyed, of course, in the poet’s *own words*, invented for this express purpose (2-3). According to Rickword, “a poem as a ‘set of

notes,' most of them 'borrowed' from other texts...can only be 'the result of an indolence of the imagination'" (3).

Although Rickword's criticism of *The Waste Land* was shared by other critics in 1922, the poem is now often hailed as Eliot's greatest and most satisfying poem. Perloff notes that "the language of citation" that characterizes much of modernist experimental poetics "has found a new lease on life in our own information age" with the commonplace practice of borrowing words and information from other's blogs, Facebook posts, and instant messages (4). Perloff perceptively points out that "forwarded emails can be altered without the recipient's knowledge so that the sender's identity actually merges with that of the writer whose text is being forwarded. And the poets' blogs, heavily dependent as most are on recycled material, are further framed by viewer responses, producing a curious amalgam of voices that begins to take on a life of its own" (4). This "amalgam of voices" characterizes the contemporary documentary poetry of interest in this study, comprising a key aspect of the more public "local" materials that are featured in social documentary poetry.

Marjorie Perloff notes that much poetry affiliated with the "first wave" of the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E school in the 1980s can be characterized by "programmatically nonreferentiality, words and phrases refusing to 'add up' to any sort of coherent, much less transparent, statement" (8). These poems sometimes make use of found materials, where the links between words are "produced by sound rather than signification" (8). Perloff notes that the "defeat of reader expectation—a kind of cognitive dissonance—is central to these poems" (9), though in her examples from Peter Inman, Diane Ward, and Bruce Andrews, all of the "words, morphemes, syntactic units, and sound patterns...have been *chosen* by the poet in question" (9). The originality of the poet's

inventio is therefore the “constructive principle,” since passages are strategically chosen and arranged by the author (9).

Perhaps the most well-known twenty-first century literary manifestation of such appropriated language is conceptual poetry, which we might think of as a kind of hyper-L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E school. As Perloff explains, “nothing quite prepared the poetry world for the claim...that it is possible to write ‘poetry’ that is entirely ‘unoriginal’ and nevertheless qualifies as poetry” (12). Conceptual poetry is poetry by other means, and like the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E school, its originality is in its construction; indeed, we might say that conceptual poetry’s *construction* is more the point of it, rather than the *final product* of the poem. This is true for conceptual works that seem to be more socially engaged as well, as in M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*: the text, while remixing a found court document, testifies to a fractured, willfully-forgotten history as it resurrects memories of the dispossessed Africans who were murdered so the ship’s owners could collect insurance money. Importantly, the conceptual poetry of *Zong!* is not decontextualized, as we often see in the poetry of the movement’s more prominent practitioners. Concluding the primary text is a reflective essay authored by Philip, as well as the only public document about the massacre that we have on record...until *Zong!*’s publication, of course. Still, the types of experimentation in conceptual poetry overlap with techniques found in documentary poetry; indeed, many courses on documentary poetics will contain a unit on conceptual poetry, and I discuss their relationship further in Chapter 1, Part 2: “Contemporary Documentary Poetics: An Overview.”

* * *

Taken together, these contemporary contexts explain why there has been a privileging of experimental, “avant-garde” poetics when discussing poets who are working within a

documentary mode. In much of academia, the assumption has been, at least since the nineties, that the most formally experimental poems present the greatest challenge to hegemonic power structures, rather than contemporary neoformalist or narrative poetics that are also clearly operating in a documentary mode. In his essay, “The Politics of Docupoetry,” Joseph Harrington justifies this trend by noting that contemporary poets “live in an era of intensive manipulation of images and information by the politically and economically powerful. Documentary poets’ ability to reconcile—or at least to acknowledge—these competing forces” often leads to experimental, non-linear poetics, including how we use and present language and information, to challenge the dominant paradigms (Harrington 82). This turn is marked by a shift in documentary film as well, where in the late-twentieth-century we saw a turn to more “reflexive” modes, those in which “the focus of text slides from the realm of historical reference to the properties of the text itself” (81), whereby the text “defamiliarizes the process of representation (81). Thus, while the “principal function of documentary has not disappeared—that is, to document, to ‘bear an indexical relation to the world’” (82), the compositional strategies we use to relate the world, and to critique or call attention to these strategies, have shifted, according to Harrington. Of course, such counter-hegemonic, textually-experimental poetics were present before the late twentieth-century, but we see such experimentation become more commonplace at about the same time we see neoliberal policies and new relationships with language and technology take hold on the American imagination and experience.

However, this privileging of experimental poetics in contemporary criticism about documentary poetics marks less of a “shift” in how poets relate to the world and more of what we collectively decide to value within our scholarship. At any given time, we see multiple currents in poetry and poetics, and these currents often intersect and diverge in interesting and

surprising ways. But our collective choices in what we read, teach, study, and publish all contribute to what we continue to value in our studies and scholarship. We know that writers have long pushed language to see what it can do and to see what their writing could do in the world. These “pushes” have always been diverse and dialectical; this is why we see Whitman’s Romantic sentiments and long lines at the same time we see Melville’s prose-poetry mash-ups and Dickinson’s brief, elliptical lyrics. Thus, I suggest that the critical valuing of “avant-garde” poetics that we see in many academic discussions of documentary poetics is grounded on the assumption that only the most experimental poetics can confront oppressive language systems and social structures that have upheld, fostered, and perpetuated violence against marginalized or oppressed populations. Really, we need only look to the sonnets of Phillis Wheatley and Claude McKay to challenge this logic; indeed poets have long experimented with expression, form, and the page to free language from traditional constraints and to confront dominant power systems. How they take up this challenge is as diverse as there are writers, and one of my goals is to reflect upon why authors make the compositional choices they do.

As such, in Chapter 2 of this dissertation I strategically discuss the social documentary poetry and poetics of Chris Llewellyn, who is commonly referred to as a “neoformalist” writer; in literary criticism, she has never been discussed in the same context as more formally-experimental poets, perhaps because she published her first book, *Fragments from the Fire*, much earlier than many twenty-first-century poets. Still, her work might be an early manifestation of what we now see in books like Craig Santos Perez’s *[hacha]* and Nowak’s *Coal Mountain Elementary*, though Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*—certainly avant-garde in its time—was published four years *before* Llewellyn’s *Fragments*. While certainly experimental in their own right, Llewellyn’s poems are often more linear and narrative than many of her

contemporaries. Her strategies for composition, however, have been just as impacted by the historical contexts, shifting ideas about language and memory, and technological innovations of the last forty years as have the poems of her peers.

Organization of Book and Description of Chapters

Guided by these contexts and my interest in engaging ongoing conversations in labor, poetry, and documentary studies, this dissertation includes three major chapters, which are comprised of four parts each, and a conclusion. In Chapter One I define my terms as I map several intersecting critical conversations about photography, documentary, and contemporary documentary poetics. I provide a brief overview of the documentary practices of Mathew Brady, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, James Agee, and Muriel Rukeyser to establish the tradition that I see my primary texts of study working within, and I explain why I choose to retain the term “documentary” in my project even though it remains contested in contemporary discussions of poetics. I further discuss the relationship between documentary poetics and the notion of political solidarity, which leads me to adopt two terms—“textual solidarity” and “internationalist textual solidarity”—to describe the overall strategies at work in select social documentary books of poetry and photographs. I conclude Chapter One with brief analyses of *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (2003), by C.D. Wright and Deborah Luster, and *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina* (2010), by Cynthia Hogue and Rebecca Ross—and I discuss these texts in terms of their social documentary praxis and my understanding of textual solidarity.

Chapter Two reads Chris Llewellyn’s *Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911* as a contemporary social documentary book, and I suggest that Llewellyn pushes the notion of textual solidarity toward the concept of internationalist textual solidarity. First published in 1987, this book of poems and photographs was revised and published again in 1993, and a thirtieth anniversary edition with revised poems and commentary was printed in 2016. Unlike the social documentary books from the 1930s, Llewellyn’s *Fragments* does not follow the typical form of documenter going out into the world to record

what she sees; instead, Llewellyn's book seeks to document the events leading up to, during, and after the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of 1911 *decades after* the great tragedy led to the deaths of 146 garments workers in New York City. Llewellyn did not collaborate with a specific person or persons to gather photographs for the book; rather, she sifted through images from the early twentieth century to garner a range of photographs. Further, Llewellyn's poems often rely on secondary source material, and the latest edition intersperses six biblical passages, nine photographs, one poem written by a Japanese activist-poet, and twenty-six original poems, which are themselves created from or inspired by primary and secondary historical documents, such as excerpts from the trial following the Triangle Fire, interviews with survivors, and eye-witness accounts by reporters at the scene of the fire. Together, the poems and photographs tell a story about the fire and its aftermath (loosely following the structure of Leon Stein's nonfiction novel, *Triangle Fire*) and about the women and girls who worked there. I argue that Llewellyn's poems and photographs do the important work of collective memory-building, a key aspect of *doing documentary work* in general, in service of international working-class solidarity.

Chapter Three discusses two works by Mark Nowak, *Shut Up Shut Down* (2008) and *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009), both of which integrate photographs throughout the text. These books stand as perhaps the strongest examples of what internationalist textual solidarity can look and sound like. *Shut Up Shut Down* centers on the pervasive unemployment along the Rust Belt following the closings of factories in historic industrial areas. The book is arranged in five sections that draw from newspaper columns, academic publications, Nowak's keen eye for observation, and a classic documentary book of photographs by Bernd and Hilla Becher. Overall, *Shut Up Shut Down* serves as a poetic archive of jobs lost due to corporate globalization (he even literally marks the number of workers who lost their jobs in certain regions throughout the final

section of the book), and it bears witness to lives that were impacted by the steel industry and its demise in the United States. As Nowak himself has suggested, his research interests and poetry grew from his working-class roots, as well as his Marxist critique of the neoliberal world order that contributed to the outsourcing of American workers' jobs *and* the near ubiquitous assumption that foreign workers are to blame for employment rates in the United States. Like Llewellyn, Nowak's identity, theoretical focus, and poetic eye have been shaped by the anti-union conservatism of the Reagan administration, as well as the rollbacks on worker rights that were continued during the Clinton Administration.

Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary* extends Nowak's poetic archival work by concentrating on the coal mining industry, with a particular focus on the material and psycho-social impact of the Sago Mine Explosion that killed twelve West Virginian miners in 2006 as it allows prose poems to unfold from verbatim testimony recorded by the West Virginia Office of Miners' Health and Safety in the days and months following the Sago disaster. Like some of the poems in *Fragments from the Fire* and *Shut Up Shut Down*, *Coal Mountain Elementary* makes use of appropriation as its dominant rhetorical and literary mode. The book includes photographs set in West Virginia and China by British-born Malaysian photographer Ian Teh, and Nowak's prose poems sample from surprising sources: the West Virginia Office of Miners' Health and Safety website, lesson plans from the American Coal Foundation's website, and over three dozen news articles that report on mining disasters in China. Nowak organizes his book into three parts and introduces each with lesson plans about "cookie mining." Elements of these formal lessons are then woven throughout the book, highlighting the "costs associated with mining coal" (Nowak 87). Thus, the written text on the pages stems directly from his sources so the imaginative work of the book rests in Nowak's staging of the materials, rather than in his creation of poetic

language. Taken together, *Shut Up Shut Down* and *Coal Mountain Elementary* reflect upon the assemblage, ekphrastic, and paraphrastic strategies at work in these texts, suggesting that these aesthetic and rhetorical strategies are part of Nowak's documentary practice, which I suggest is marked by internationalist textual solidarity.

My conclusion then briefly reflects upon the relevance and necessity of social documentary poetics and internationalist textual solidarity in the third decade of the twenty-first century, a decade that has already been punctuated by environmental devastation, a global pandemic, and state-sanctioned murder of Black men and women.

Chapter One:

Critical Mappings: Documentary Work and Contemporary Poetics

This...is designed in two intentions: as the beginning of a larger piece of work; and to stand of itself, independent of any such further work as may be done.

~ James Agee, "Preface," *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Part 1:

Early Documentary Work in the United States

The earliest American examples of documentary texts—those that included photographs *and* words to capture an event or state of affairs and that were specifically intended “to teach” and “to show”—include those by Mathew Brady’s team of photographers who sought to capture the background and effects of the American Civil War, creating visual documents that have shaped and continue to shape our understanding of the mid-nineteenth century.¹ Published in newspapers to extend the informative and emotional value of the written text, Brady’s images were the first in the United States to capture war with “light-writing,” as earlier visual depictions of war were rendered by painting and sketching. Brady’s photos (typically shot by his team members and selected for presentation by Brady) aided the public in visualizing the war and its key players, particularly when he opened his first public exhibition of Civil War photographs, *The Dead of Antietam*, in 1862. One of the earliest examples of a documentary *book*, however, was composed by one of Brady’s former employees, Alexander Gardner, who eventually split from Brady’s enterprise and produced his own *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* in 1868. In his *Photographic Sketch Book*, Gardner arranges words and images to serve as an “enduring...memento...of the fearful struggle through which the country ha[d] just passed” (Gardner). His introductory remarks suggest that:

Localities that would have scarcely been known, and probably never remembered, save in their immediate vicinity, have become celebrated, and will forever be held sacred as memorable fields, where thousands of brave men yielded up their lives a willing sacrifice for the cause they had espoused.

Gardner was not wrong; photographic images of the American Civil War, combined with the captions that accompany them, as is the case in Gardner’s *Photographic Sketch Book*, continue to construct our understanding of the War. His is an archive of places, events, and people that offers

a trace of elements of the Civil War era. And because his was a sustained project, one that took time to (literally) develop the images and to understand the context to record the notes accompanying his photos, his *Sketch Book* is best understood as a work of documentary rather than photojournalism.

Gardner's introductory remarks both reflect and construct a faith in the camera to record, transmit, and memorialize a kind of truth about the War. He claims, for example, that "Verbal representations of such places, or scenes, may or may not have the merit of accuracy; but photographic presentments of them will be accepted by posterity with undoubting faith" (Gardner). Of note, however, is his self-correction in these remarks: "representations of such places, *or scenes*" (emphasis added). While Gardner trusted his camera to capture a reality, his comment suggests an awareness of his *staging* of scenes from the greatest drama in American history to that point. Contemporary readers now understand that bodies were moved and arranged "for aesthetic or narrational purposes" (Sweet 107), so the photographs might be better understood by the viewing public. Of course, no actual battle scenes or wounded soldiers were photographed because of the time needed to capture an image with "bulky cameras, long exposure times, and the cumbersome wet-plate process" (Sweet 109). Indeed, the "photographic presentments" feature buildings, fortifications, landscapes, individuals able to pose, and motionless, staged, dead bodies—a documentary, indeed, though one that is distinct from documentary books that would be popularized in future decades.

Timothy Sweet argues in *Traces of War* (1990) that Civil War photographs, Gardner's included, are strikingly unified in their intentional, controlled composition; they construct a notion of heroic idealism and technological superiority of the North, which in turn justified the outcome of the war, despite the unimaginable loss of life. Gardner's "Signal Tower, Elk

Mountain, Maryland” exemplifies his control of both image and ideological message. His caption argues that the “credit” of “hero of Antietam” belongs to “the signal officers [who] were most intelligently and advantageously posted...on the summit of Elk Mountain...overlooking the battle-field” (22).² The adverbs “intelligently” and “advantageously” suggest a sophistication of Northern commanders who issued orders, as well as the competence and technological prowess—the “skill, vigilance, and powerful glasses” (22)—of the Union soldiers who executed such orders. The accompanying photograph offers visual “proof” of the text’s claims: while two soldiers seem to glance at Gardner’s photographic process, the signal post’s watchman appears utterly focused on his task, clothed in his dignifying military vest, signal telescope positioned perfectly parallel to both the earth and wood beams of the fortification (see figure 1):

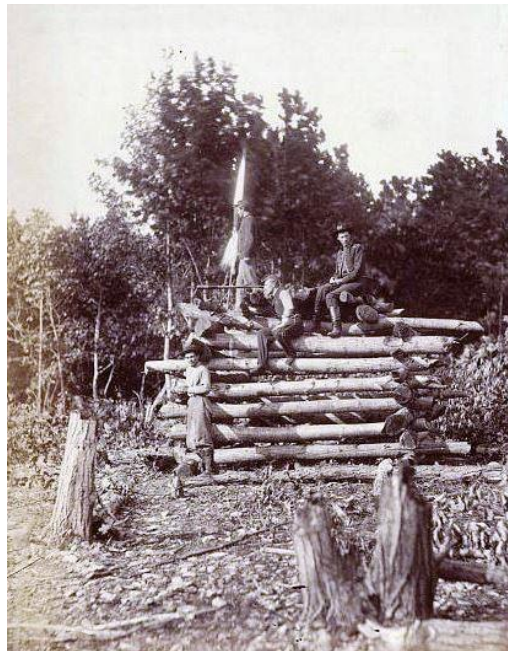


Figure 1: Gardner, Alexander. *Signal Tower, Elk Mountain, Maryland*. 1862. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, by Alexander Gardner and Alfred R Waud, Philp & Solomons, no. 22, www.loc.gov/item/01021785/

To make certain his message was not lost on his readers, and to ensure the ideological function of his *Sketch Book*, Gardner concludes this caption with an excerpt from “a rebel correspondent”:

We could not make a manœuvre in front or rear that was not instantly revealed to their keen look-outs; as soon as the intelligence could be communicated to their batteries below, shot and shell were launched against the moving columns. It was this information, conveyed by the little flags upon the mountain-top, that no doubt enabled the enemy to concentrate his force against our weakest points. (22)

The Battle of Antietam saw the largest loss of life in a single day during the American Civil War, a fact that is overshadowed by Gardner's rhetoric (in caption and in image); his documentary work was to both memorialize the landscape of war and provide a unifying message of support for the Union cause, rather than to inspire a kind of collective action for change, as we see in the social documentary books produced decades after Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book*.

Sweet's study also lucidly explores the relationships between the pastoral, mid-nineteenth-century battlefield photography and the Civil War poetry of Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, two of the most significant nineteenth century literary predecessors to twentieth and twenty-first century documentary poets. Sweet demonstrates that, in Whitman's war poems, the bodies seen in the civil-war-torn landscape cannot be fully described with words—Whitman understands that the bodies and the injuries done to them are not representable, even in poetry. But more significant is that the images of wounded and dead, “fragments” of the war, threaten the structural unity of Whitman's belief and claim that America is “essentially the greatest poem.” As Sweet suggests, to mend this fragmentation, both poetically and politically, Whitman relies upon his readers to make meaning (55), but he intends for the readership to draw from a shared experience, indeed a “representational paradigm” that typifies the war, death, and fragmentation in order to uphold the “sovereign Union, relentless, permanently comprising all” (qtd. in Sweet 56). Whitman's dominant strategy is to “invoke...love of comrades [a central

theme in his poetry], as the only healing power that might hold together not only the wounded body of the soldier...but also his poetics and ultimately the Union” (Sweet 33).

Melville’s poetry, however, contrasts with Whitman’s: while Whitman invokes adhesion to dissolve the wounds of war into the rhetoric of the Union, Melville’s poetry criticizes the “naturalizing tendency of such representation,” noting that what will stem from the war (or perhaps the causes of it) is simply more “disintegration and destruction” (Sweet 165). In *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, Melville refuses to attach the mechanized violence of war to a democratic ideology. He sought to “reflect critically upon the cultural function of the affirmative poetry of the Civil War, which was to aestheticize and thereby legitimate war, patriotism, and the state” (Sweet 180). Melville permits himself to poetically “speculate on the possibility that the violence and suffering of civil war might again erupt on American soil [since American nationalism] idealized the war-torn nation instead of asking hard questions about race, freedom, autonomy, and the individual’s relation to the state” (191). Melville’s poems thus foreshadow the impending and doomed race relations and future battles within the Union; they are especially prescient given the current rebellions in 2020 that have been triggered by the state-sanctioned murder of Black men and women via the police force. Taken together, Whitman’s and Melville’s poetry and poetics anticipate the spiritual, reflective, expository, hopeful, and critical elements that we see in contemporary documentary poetics, which I discuss later in my introduction.

Jacob Riis’s 1890 publication of *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* was the first *popular* book in the U.S. to offer photographs and written text to “show” or “teach” about something of social import, as it exposed the conditions in New York City’s urban slums.³ Riis’s book had an explicit audience and purpose in mind: to reveal to the middle and upper classes the living and working conditions of men, women, and children on the Lower

East Side so as to move their hearts and inspire them to seek social change. Part of Riis's didacticism, though, was also to reform conventional nineteenth century thought about socially undesirable behaviors: rather than claim that immorality caused sex work, crime, and poor living and working conditions in general, Riis's book suggests that such undesirable conditions and behaviors were constructed by the larger society. As such, *How the Other Half Lives* suggests that the poor are not to be blamed for being poor; instead, the dominant society must step in to improve conditions, which would in turn, from Riis's point of view, lead to more improved behaviors among the poor. While the racism and anti-Semitism embedded within Riis's writing is obvious and noxious to contemporary readers, the book—an excerpt of which was first published as an article in *Scribner Magazine*—successfully appealed to the emotions of its readers and inspired the New York Tenement Housing Act of 1901, which mandated reforms to tenement housing, including improved fire safety. Riis's book also helps clarify the difference between photojournalism and social documentary photography: time and sustained engagement with humanity—often real families—on the brink of struggle or change. While Civil War photographers were doing important, ground-breaking work, their immediate job was to photograph and uphold an ideology. While Riis's work is unquestionably ideological, the documentary project is social because part of its purpose was to inspire insight, action, and change.

Riis's documentary book was followed by the social documentary photography of Lewis Hine. Known for his photographs that expose child labor and that reveal men working in the steel industry, Hine's images are now considered to be iconic traces of the human face of work in the first few decades of the twentieth century. William Stott, author of *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, notes that Hine was intent on revealing the social elements that had to be

appreciated and corrected. Stott suggests that Hine, like Riis, believed the camera “would be a mightier weapon than the pen against poverty” (31), since the photograph was associated in the popular imagination with a direct correlation to the thing. Informed by the progressivist politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hine did not see himself as an artist genius, but a worker doing cultural and political work; he insisted that his work pictures, particularly in his *Men at Work* project, “served as an important offset to some misconceptions about industry. One is that many of our material assets, fabrics, photographs, motors, airplanes, and what not—‘just happen’, as the product of a bunch of impersonal machines” (qtd. in Trachtenberg, *Reading...227*). By “slipping” the word “photographs” into this quote, Hine suggests that, like the construction of the Empire State Building, photography is the work of human “toil” (227). In fact, as Alan Trachtenberg records in his seminal study *Reading American Photographs: Images as History—Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, Hine felt that more reformers should “get a camera” so that records could be produced by people in the “thick of the battle” for social reform (227).

Importantly, even as early as 1909 Hine acknowledged concerns with representation and authenticity in photography, though he concludes that social reformers, whom he often refers to as “social workers,” should trust the photograph as a tool of reform. His essay “Social Photography” acknowledges that photography “has an added realism of its own [since] the picture is a symbol that brings one immediately into close touch with reality” (Hine 111). Hine goes on to suggest that the photograph, while a symbolic representation of a moment, “is often more effective than the reality would have been, because, in the picture, the non-essential and conflicting interests have been eliminated...For this reason the average person believes implicitly that the photograph cannot falsify” (111). Even as Hine acknowledges the public’s

trust in the evidentiary nature of the photograph, and even though he seems to have no trouble reconciling the symbolic and mimetic natures of the photograph, he warns his audience that, “while photographs may not lie, liars may photograph” (111), leading him to conclude that social workers need not always fear the camera or the products of its labor, but implicitly warns them to be honest in their use and manipulation of the camera.

Hine ultimately believed that the photograph could bring what needed to be seen into light. As Alan Trachtenberg notes in *Classic Essays on Photography*, unlike Riis,

Hine’s aim was not so much to shock a passive audience into fear and indignation; instead, he wished to show working people in their environments in a more detached and objective manner. Social photography was for him an educational process; a picture was a piece of evidence, a record of social injustice, but also of individual human beings surviving with dignity in intolerable conditions. (109)

The metaphorical and literal significance of photography as a means to bring social reform “to light” was not lost on Hine: he noted that, to confront the “great social peril [of] *darkness* and ignorance,” the “dictum” must be, “Let there be light” (Hine 112, emphasis added). In his campaign for light, Hine notes that social workers “have for [their] advance agent the light writer—the photograph” (112). In *Reading American Photographs*, Trachtenberg explains, however, that Hine’s photographs moved beyond the typical Progressive-reformist mode, which relied upon social evidence and exposition. Hine’s work valued and relied upon a process of communication between the photographer, the photograph, and the audience. Trachtenberg clarifies that Hine:

invent[ed] presentational forms through which social information might become the viewer’s own concrete experience—not facts “out there,” in a distant realm, or facts to

excite pity, but visual facts as the occasion for awakening the viewer's awareness of an imaginative empathy with the pictured others, and thus the viewer's own social being.

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Trachtenberg explains that Hine's philosophy of photography can be best understood through the theoretical lens of sociality, a notion developed by George Herbert Meade, a contemporary and colleague of John Dewey. Sociality is characterized by interaction and engagement whereby a "person engages in internal dialogue, takes on the role or point of view of the other, imagines it provisionally, as one's own in order to respond to it" (Trachtenberg, *Reading...*204).

Understanding Hine's photographs through this lens, Trachtenberg suggests that Hine sought "to awaken in [his audience] an imaginative response which would issue a revised identity, one which now acknowledges the imagined voices of his pictured workers as part of one's essential social world" (204), a world that consists "of all the others with whom one interacts, imaginatively as much as materially" (204). For Hine, then, documentary photography should expose and stand as evidence, but it should also be experienced and, therefore, inspire critical and empathetic reading experiences in which the photograph acts upon the views, so much so that the experience—and the photographed subjects—become part of the audience's world.

Trachtenberg concludes that "[t]here is, then, in Hine's early work, an implicit counterstatement to the Progressive reformist ideology he embraced—a subtle but nonetheless distinct resistance to the tendency of reformers to make objects of their underclass 'cases'" (Trachtenberg, *Reading...*206).

Hine's confidence in the power of the photograph to record injustice, offer evidence, affirm the working person's dignity, and elicit communicative and connective experiences found a new forum and institutional support in the US government's photography program from 1935-1944 as

part of the New Deal's program for social reform. While Hine never completed a project for this photography program, other social documentary photographers would capture "America for Americans," thereby offering the strongest visual impression that we still consult to understand the Great Depression's impact on rural farmers. These now-iconic images were commissioned by three government agencies—the Resettlement Administration from 1935-1937, the Farm Security Administration from 1937-1942, and the Office of War Information from 1942-1944—all of which had in mind a specific liberal-reformist agenda that saw in the photography program an opportunity to convince audiences that the economic plight of southwestern farmers was caused primarily by ineffective farming practices.

While these important images certainly elicited sympathy, they also attempted to inspire confidence in the government's efforts to consolidate farms and resettle farmers and their families, and the thematic focus of the photographs produced by these agencies were guided by American economist, government official, and photographer Roy Stryker. As Cara Finnegan notes in her 2003 study *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs*, Stryker's New Deal, social reformist agenda prompted him to solicit photographs that "related people to the land and vice versa" because these photographs reinforced the government's position that poverty could be controlled by "changing land practices" (43). Stryker's directives were reminiscent of late-nineteenth-century beliefs that that poor were responsible for their poverty, as he asked FSA photographer Dorothea Lange, for example, to photograph people cooking, sleeping, and praying, thereby pictorially showcasing a set of moral behaviors that could, as the photos suggest, improve a family's economic condition. The photography program of the New Deal differed from nineteenth century views, however, in that it recognized that structural changes must be enacted and enforced to confront poverty.

Perhaps the most respected photographer that collaborated with the FSA in the thirties was Walker Evans, whose photographs are consistently recognized by contemporary critics as being more than images designed to illicit sympathy even as they document labor and laborers. According to Lincoln Kirstein, Evans's book of photographs is more literary than anything else, noting that "Walker Evans's eye is a poet's eye. It finds corroboration in the poet's voice" (196). In his elaboration upon the theoretical underpinnings of Evans's work, Kirstein also offers directives for how we might read and experience *American Photographs*; he writes:

Physically the pictures in this book exist as separate prints. They lack the surface, obvious continuity of the moving picture, which by its physical nature compels the observer to perceive a series of images as parts of a whole. But these photographs, of necessity seen singly, are not conceived as isolated pictures made by the camera turned indiscriminately here or there. In intention and in effect they exist as a collection of statements deriving from and presenting a consistent attitude. Looked at in sequence they are overwhelming in their exhaustiveness of detail, their poetry of contrast, and, for those who wish to see it, their moral implication. (Kirstein 194-95)

Trachtenberg clarifies Kirstein's comments explaining, "With his eye for signifying detail, for the accidental revelations in juxtaposed objects...Evans set out to prove that apparently documentary photographs could be as complex as a fine piece of writing, as difficult and rewarding in their demands" (*Reading...*240). Such photographic compositions (and Kirstein and Trachtenberg's explanation of them) anticipate the conversations about documentary poetics that we see today.

Unlike his FSA contemporaries, Evans was more interested in documenting change. He was not necessarily concerned with presenting photos as finished pieces, but as pieces that must be

sewn together by the viewer, reflecting the pieces of America, but especially an America in process, one that is always becoming. Evans realized that a book of photos could have a “psychology of form” whereby photos could be arranged in such a way as to eloquently address interested readers. His pictures show a nation caught within opposition and difference; they also offer by enactment another way of seeing that is different from the commercial and instrumental methods of seeing which they oppose. Aesthetic experience can become political experience because it posits a relationship between one’s personal experience and a collectivity. By forcing viewers to account for and take in successive images and demand their interaction, while reflecting a changing American society, his *American Photographs* practice a political art, not a program of reform, as was the case with much of the visual art commissioned by the FSA. The self-consciousness of Evans’s photographic project, as well as his interest in forcing his viewers to work as they engaged with his work, was echoed in his collaborative project with author James Agee.

In 1936 Evans and Agee were commissioned by editors of *Fortune* magazine to travel south and “do a story on the agricultural economy of the region” (Coles, R. 1). After living and traveling with the men, women, and children they met, Agee ultimately decided not to write the article for the magazine. Robert Coles points out that:

In a sense, [Agee’s] mission failed; and it surely did, to some considerable extent, because of his passionate desire to make some kind of amends to people whom he would eventually present to the world as a hurt, yes, but as almost enviably noble—as, indeed, worthy of Biblical “praise” due “famous men.” (12)

Following their refusal to write the brief magazine article, Agee and Evans collaborated on the now iconic documentary book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), which interrogates the

tradition even as it propels it into the second half of the twentieth century. As I note in my Preface, Agee repeatedly agonizes over his inability to do his subjects justice, despite the fact that he took time to live with and know three tenant families and to connect their struggles and beauties to a larger economic and human context. Agee's text is almost entirely comprised of what we might call "field observations"—he constructs a record, often in the words of the families with whom he lived, that would not exist otherwise. Along with his observations are his narrations, his reflections that speak both to his inability to do his subjects justice by way of representation and his biting commentary on economic injustice, which he indicts as a "crime" and "murder" throughout the book since such injustice deprives human beings of achieving their full potential.

In addition to these observations and narrations, however, Agee includes many pages that unsettle the reading experience. In "A Country Letter," for instance, Agee experiments with repetition, typeface, line, textual sampling, and allusion, drawing from conversations he had or overheard during his stay with three Alabaman tenant families. The movement of the text appears to follow an order: first, he authenticates the words of individuals within three tenant families as they express wonder, loss, and regret; second, he includes what seems to be an imagined dream sequence, which is immediately followed by defamiliarizing symbols (punctuation marks). We then again read the words of tenant families, though this time redacted, as in a poem of erasure, to focus on their worries, regret, and confusion. For the reader, their sentiments feel heavier in this redacted passage. The section then ends with the Beatitudes from the Gospel of Matthew. However, the version of the Beatitudes from which he samples contains the word "multitudes," instead of "crowds," which alludes both to Whitman's *Song of Myself* and Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (an excerpt of which is included at the end of the book).

Agee includes no transitions between these shifts in voices, texts, and passages: they stand as one “Country Letter,” though seemingly fragmented, non-linear, and challenging in both content and form. In addition to his inclusion of symbolic punctuation marks, as in parentheses and colons, he attempts to replicate the speech as he heard it to capture the texture of actuality. As he records the concerns of one tenant farmer, he writes, “Rest vmd git along all right” (72),⁴ which itself can be a defamiliarizing and, paradoxically, grounding experience. Taken together, the surprising features of Agee’s writing force his readers to read carefully, constructively, and empathetically as they make connections where they seem to absent. Too, the formal experimentation calls attention to the text *as a text*, which is “merely portent and fragment, experiment, dissonant prologue” (Agee xi), a glimpse into what the book seeks to reveal. Like Evans’s photographs, Agee’s documentary text is formally self-reflexive, ambiguous, challenging, and rewarding, and it still stands as one of the finest indictments of capitalism and its fostering of “certain normal predicaments of human divinity” (Agee x).

Just a few years before the publication of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Muriel Rukeyser published her equally-indicting and formally complex poem sequence *The Book of the Dead* in 1938, as part of her *U.S. I* volume. Originally intended to be published with documentary photographs by Nancy Naumburg, *The Book of the Dead* was written in response to the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel disaster of 1931 in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, which led to the deaths of hundreds of miners, mostly Black migrants, who were exposed to lethal amounts of silica dust. Freelance writer and editor for West Virginia Public Broadcasting Catherine Venable Moore arranged the most recent 2018 edition of this book, which, for the first time ever, includes three photographs by Naumburg, which testifies to this poem’s lasting presence in American culture. In fact, Joseph Harrington notes that Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead* remains the most widely

discussed early documentary poetic text in contemporary conversations about documentary poetics. He explains that her poem sequence is an early example of formal experimentation and reflexivity and that her “refusal to set forth a linear, unambiguous argument, and her critique of the documentary gaze have become hallmarks of twenty-first-century North American documentary poetics” (Harrington, “The Politics...” 81-82).

Rukeyser employs several strategies that we see in the documentary tradition of the 1930s, but also those that diverge from that tradition as well. Like her contemporary James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, *The Book of the Dead* began as a type of investigative journalism (she conducted her own interviews with workers, their families, and other community members connected to the disaster), but it became something larger in scale, one that integrates the lyric and research into the journalistic encounter. Foreshadowing our contemporary documentary poetry scene, she also draws from a number of text-based sources, including trial transcripts and reports. Rukeyser’s source-based poetics and allusions to camera work reveal that both the camera and poetry can “‘extend the document’ if it is allowed to see the hidden lives of the dispossessed; this is [their] revolutionary force” (Goody 366). Alex Goody reminds us in her excellent essay “Poetry and Technology,” however, that:

...there is also that which escapes the fixity of the technological image (the “little boy” who “blurs the camera-glass fixed” in “Gauley Bridge”). Thus, at the end of *The Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser makes a call to “widen the lens,” to encompass a vision that, with its ability to see and value difference, counters a dangerously reductive, fascistic outlook.

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This call invites Rukeyser’s readers, whom she referred to as “witnesses” since this word has an “overtone of responsibility” (Rukeyser, *The Life...*175), to authenticate the voices present in her

text *and* those that are beyond the pages of the poem and frames of the photograph. This reflexivity, along with her amalgam of sources and voices within the poem, push the traditions of investigative journalism and documentary as she indicts the machinations of capital/capitalism, as well as their inherent racism and classism.

While many documentary photographers and writers expressed their concerns about the inability to represent the totality of what they were witnessing and experiencing, Agee and Rukeyser formally *show* or *reveal* these concerns. In different ways, their texts call attention to themselves as texts; this reflexivity is then valued and practiced even further in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries across disciplines, including in conversations about contemporary documentary poetry and poetics, which I elaborate upon further in parts 2 and 3 of this chapter. Given the complex and diverse legacy of documentary work from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, however, we must establish a working vocabulary to at least provisionally pin down the contested term “documentary,” particularly as it relates to poetry and poetics.

Part 2:

Contemporary Documentary Poetry and Poetics: A Brief Overview

The term “documentary” loosely describes of a cluster of poetic works published primarily since the 1980s, often with attention to the writers’ roots in literary modernism, as in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Marianne Moore’s *Observations*, Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*, and William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*. In academic circles, the more widely-read or acknowledged contemporary American poets whose work has been labeled “documentary” in nature include Claudia Rankine, Kaia Sand, Susan Howe, Adrienne Rich, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Rae Armantrout, C.D. Wright, Julianna Spahr, Mark Nowak, and Kristin Prevallet. Poets writing outside the United States who have garnered much attention in recent years, and whose work has been described as “documentary,” include M. NourbeSe Philip, Craig Santos Perez, and Caroline Bergvall. Less-read poets in academic circles, but whose interesting and important work could clearly be described as documentary, include Marilyn Nelson, Chris Llewellyn, Robin Clarke, Jim Daniels, Ruth Yarrow, and Mike Yarrow. Interestingly, all of these poets do not typically carry the same poetic signifiers: some are described as labor poets, whereas others are considered conceptual, investigative, or neoformalist. And of course, many of their labels are often hyphenated: conceptual-documentary, auto-documentary, neoformalist documentary, labor documentary. Sometimes our language refers to a particular “school” of poets, other times our language attempts to clarify technique, and at times our terms signify the poet’s relationship to the world. Indeed, the words we use to categorize poets are often troubling and complex, even if necessary, to map poetic relationships and distinctions.

My use of the word “documentary” is not meant to serve as a formal “school” of poetry. Instead, I use the word “documentary” to describe both a method and a mode in certain poems or larger book-length projects. Indeed, “documentary,” as I have noted in my introduction, is a *doing*: it matters how authors produce and share their work, what types of materials and

strategies they adopt in their compositions, and for what purposes and audience. Most contemporary scholarship uses the general phrase “documentary poetics” to describe the reproduction, appropriation, assemblage, or re-mixing of documents—such as excerpts from books, court reports, newspapers, or even Google searches—within or as catalyst for poetry. Some scholars add to this description of “documentary” the reporting or staging of findings from investigative fieldwork (such as ethnographic work, travelogues, or personal interviews). Oftentimes (though not always), poets do this documentary work to reflect a society at the brink of change, or a society or community that has experienced a collective trauma that might otherwise be overlooked. After I offer a brief overview of the current scholarship on “documentary” poetry and poetics, I clarify my own parameters for the term at the end of this chapter.

A number of prominent contemporary critics have attempted to tease out what we mean by “documentary” poetry and poetics. Joseph Harrington sees documentary poetry as that which contains quotations or passages from documents and “relates historical narratives, whether macro or micro, human or natural” (Harrington, “The Politics...” 81). For Harrington, the term “documentary” refers to both the process of poetic composition (it begins with already produced information and is then manipulated into poetry) and to the thematic content and movement of the poetry (it relates to “historical narratives,” thereby positing a relationship between poetry, history, and memory). Harrington’s emphasis on quotations and passages from documents, though, suggests that he is referring specifically to textually source-based poetry, poetry that begins with an already-produced text as part of the poet’s material for composition.

Prominent poet and activist Mark Nowak adds to Harrington’s definition another source for documentary poetic composition: Nowak defines documentary poetry as that which uses

“reportage—news reports, testimonies...*interviews, ethnography, et cetera*—and then creating out from these sources” (qtd. in Leong, *Contested* 36; emphasis added). In his definition, Nowak suggests another set of sources for documentary projects: interviews and ethnographic work. Nowak’s formulation thus broadens Harrington’s conception of documentary and moves it away from a purely text-based poetics, and back into the realm of “documentary” as we have come to understand it from the body of work produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a body of work that often conducted investigative and ethnographic research.

Nowak’s poetry suggests, however, that it matters what sources we use in our poetry, and who we interview for testimony. As Michael Leong has pointed out in his *Contested Records*, Nowak’s social documentary practice “differentiate[s] him from, say, Susan Howe” since Nowak seems “to suggest a difference between reportage and other historical documents” (36). We might conclude, then, that various modes persist in the documentary poetry tradition, modes that might be characterized by the sites of fieldwork, the content of interview testimony, types of sampled documents, and even the thematic content that these poets either begin with or draw from the sources. Too, it seems to matter who and what the (documentary) poetry is for.

Cole Swensen’s *Noise that Stays Noise* likewise distinguishes between two modes of documentary expression in contemporary poetics. For Swensen, the starting point of the documentary project is what characterizes these modes: some documentary poets, such as Mark Nowak, begin with the information (the sources) and “augment” it with “the language of art” (64). Swensen suggests that this documentary mode inspires action and wants readers “out in the world doing things” (64). Other documentary poets, including Susan Howe, begin with artistic and poetic language and “augment...it with the language of information” from sources (64). Swensen suggests that poets operating in this documentary mode “want us to reconsider, to think

more deeply, and they use poeiticity to slow down our assimilation of language, to encourage us to take detours, to ponder alternatives” (64), rather than to “incite action” (64).

This word “documentary” is thus still a contested (and at times confusing) term, much like it was in early photography and film circles, and scholars continue to try to clarify what we mean by “documentary” poetry. Joseph Harrington, for example, coined the term “docupoetry”⁵ to emphasize that, within his framework, documentary poetry is that which is built from or engages with already-existing documents, a helpful term, though as I mention above, seems too narrow to include poetry that draws from first-hand accounts and eye-witness testimony by the poet. Marjorie Perloff writes about “poetry by other means,”⁶ which on the surface seems a bit broader than Harrington’s definition, but in practice (in her scholarship) seems to privilege what she considers to be avant-garde poetics, particularly language- or conceptual- based poems, thereby falling into the same limiting definition as Harrington. Cole Swensen opts for a broader, and instructive, descriptive category: “research-based poetics,” but this term ends up being misleading. We could say, for example, that most writing is research-based, but that does not mean that everything written is documentary—this would make “documentary,” as a descriptive category, groundless. Russian literary critic Ilya Kukulkin uses the term “documentalist” to describe recent trends in contemporary Russian literature, but his study, like Harrington’s and Perloff’s, seems to privilege text-based sources. Jeffrey Gray and Ann Keniston discuss various “poetr[ies] of engagement,”⁷ though their term is a bit too broad, pointing more toward a social positioning of a poem and the work that it does in the world, rather than the techniques and sources used to compose the poetry.

In his recent and unprecedented study, *Contested Records: The Turn to Documents in Contemporary North American Poetry* (2020), Michael Leong intervenes in this confusion. He

distinguishes between three “discrete sets of often overlapping techniques” (41),⁸ what he calls “investigative,” “documentary,” and “conceptual” practices, which he situates under the broad descriptive category “documental.” In adopting the term “documental,” Leong creates space for seemingly disparate poets to be considered together in one conversation (C.D. Wright, Mark Nowak, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Claudia Rankine, for instance, all employ documental strategies in their works). In doing so, he invites us to “appreciate” the diverse contemporary works that “draw...on other disciplinary archives outside of poetry, whether from forensic oceanography, criminal justice, the history of transatlantic slavery, Holocaust studies, or art history” (Leong 65). Leong claims that the confusion surrounding the word “documentary” stems from our continued discussion of these texts’ presumed roots in the documentary tradition of the 1930s (36-37), which, according to Leong, can limit our understanding or inclusion of certain works in discussions of “documentary” poetics.⁹

Harrington, Nowak, Swensen, and Leong inform my thinking about documentary, and I value their commentary. However, I do not see a need to separately categorize what Leong refers to as “documentary” and “investigative” poetics. The word “investigative” does help us discuss certain contemporary authors (like C.D. Wright) and their poetics (as in *One Big Self*) with added clarity. However, investigative, inquiry-based, and ethnographic processes have been intertwined with documentary work for over a century; these “investigative poetics” remain one strategy adopted by poets and other artists doing documentary work. Too, many of the documentary books from the 1930s and 40s actually do prioritize investigation and inquiry over the appropriation or citation of documents. This does not make their work un-documentary, and it certainly does not make sense to erase that widely-embraced label—“documentary”—a label that is used both inside *and* outside the academy.

That said, Leong's use of the word "documental" is instructive, as it points to our need to think through what *types* of *sources* are used, and how they are used, in contemporary poetry. In his study, Leong focuses on "poetry that participates within an economy of documentality and monumentality in its use of prior records" (40), thereby prioritizing a language of citation over investigation. Because of this, a more appropriate and inclusive term might be "source-based poetics," which suggests a consideration of the sources used in a text; it is also broad enough to encompass a variety of poets and their works. Too, the category "source-based poetics" avoids Leong's concern of positioning all documentary poets in the documentary tradition of the 1930s. Still, I acknowledge that my understanding of "sources" is determined by my years of teaching composition, where a source is something specific (it typically refers to an already-produced text or the results of fieldwork). However, outside the field of composition studies, it is possible that "source" might refer to any experience or observation, so "source-based poetry" may be an equally ambiguous and too broad a term, one that actually encompasses all of poetry.¹⁰

Thus, I am not convinced of the need to develop yet another category; instead, I think it would be clearer and in the spirit of honoring already-existing conversations inside and outside the academy to maintain "documentary" as the broader descriptive term, one that might encompass a range of methodologies and ways of *doing* documentary work.¹¹ We might, for example, refer to a work like Tobagonian-Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* as a text-based documentary work, and a work like American poet Cynthia Hogue's *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina* as an interview-based documentary work (and we could acknowledge that C.D. Wright's *One Big Self* is both text- and interview-based even as it relies on observation and the "writing-through" strategy of ekphrasis). The broad term "documentary"

thus allows us to view multiple currents in poetry simultaneously, to see their connections and overlaps—and differences.

Guided by existing theories about documentary and the existing work of poets, I understand “documentary” poetics quite broadly to refer to two overarching approaches to composition that center around sources:

- First, documentary poetry may be that which engages already-produced documents (typically published in some way, though not always), or what we might call “found” material. These materials might include text or image; some examples of found materials include (but are not limited to) excerpts from or entire books, information from the internet, court transcripts, photographs (of people, places, or things), maps, or artwork. The engagement with these documents might include such “uncreative” writing as the remixing of a text, or even a poem of erasure of a text. This engagement might also include writing that samples from a text (or multiple texts) throughout the poetry. The documentary poem, though, need not *only* be comprised of “found” materials. That said, we would not call a poem that begins with an epigraph as its only engagement with a source a documentary poem. In the documentary poem, the found materials both inform and are material for the poem’s language, the poem’s composition. The documentary poem would not exist without the document. Or,
- Documentary poetry may be that which relies upon a poet’s investigative fieldwork. The results of this fieldwork, be they interviews, surveys, travelogues, reportage, or other information, become a testifying archive (albeit unpublished until the poem is released), one that bears witness to an experience so that a record of this experience and the subject will be heard/discovered and therefore exist as part of a larger collective. This poetically

recorded archive of human experience might not otherwise be known or remembered without it. We would call such investigative findings an “unpublished source,” but a source nonetheless. These findings are then engaged in similar ways as the found documents previously discussed. Again, though, we would not call a poem that begins with a quote from an interview a documentary poem. Nor would we call poetry that solely *reflects upon* or *is inspired by* an experience or even an interview a documentary poem. In the documentary poem, the results of fieldwork both inform and are material for the poem’s language, the poem’s composition. The documentary poem would not exist without the results—the material language—of the fieldwork.

Thus, while some documentary poems evoke the notion of “witness” (in terms of both the poet and reader), not all poetry of witness would be considered “documentary” based on the above approaches. This is not to say that poetry of witness, or socially engaged poetry in general, is not worthy of study. It is worthy of critical discussion, but it is not the focus of this dissertation.

My next section, “*Social Documentary Poetics, Memory, and Textual Solidarity*,” clarifies my own terms, distinguishing between documentary poetics in general and *social* documentary poetics in particular. To help me make this distinction, I am guided by questions that arise from the legacy of the term “documentary,” questions that stem from the documentary traditions of the 1930s and 40s, yes, but also much of Modernism. Contemporary artists are encouraged to ask themselves: Who or what are the primary sources for my investigation? Why have I selected these sources, or, have my sources selected me, and why? How are these sources acting upon me? Who is my project for? What do I want my project to do?

Overall, my project seeks to participate in the ongoing conversation about documentary poetics by suggesting that contemporary poetry archives specific information in particular times

and places, information that creates memories and new realities even as it might refer to past experiences or events. Like contemporary critics Joseph Harrington, Mark Nowak, Marjorie Perloff, Cole Swensen, and Michael Leong, I wish to extend the conversation about “documentary” to develop new and interesting ways of reading contemporary poetry. That is, I wish to consider the ways in which contemporary poets engage various types of already produced information and images and/or how they conduct their own interviews and investigative fieldwork, and for what purposes and audiences.

Part 3:

Social Documentary Poetics, Memory, and Textual Solidarity

Like other contributors to the field, I must clarify my terms. As I note in my last section, I do not wish to distinguish between “documentary” and “investigative” poetics, since I see them often working within the same literary and artistic traditions. I will also continue to use the phrase “documentary poetics,” rather than “documental poetics,” first because I *do* wish to position my work and thinking in the tradition of the documentary book of the 1930s. And second, because it remains the clearest and most widely used term available, one that bridges conversations inside and outside of academia. And finally, the term “documentary” is broad enough to allow us to discuss diverse poets and a range of composition strategies in one conversation. That said, Leong’s rationale for parsing out terms makes much sense: there *is* a difference between documentary poetics in general (which can indeed include the allusive poetry of T.S. Eliot, the epic poem of William Carlos Williams; the Objectivist poetry of Charles Reznikoff; the unclassifiable poetry of Susan Howe; and the conceptual poetry of Kenneth Goldsmith) and the specific type of documentary practices that I will explore throughout my project.

To that end, I am most interested in what I call *social* documentary poetry and poetics, which has roots in modernist poetry, as well as in the documentary book traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I take my adjective “social” from Trachtenberg’s discussion of Lewis Hine’s work when he refers to “sociality,” which again is when “a person engages in internal dialogue, takes on the role or point of view of the other, imagines it provisionally as one’s own *in order to respond to it*” (Trachtenberg, *Reading...*204; emphasis added). Trachtenberg contrasts sociality—the “awareness that society consist[s] of all the others with whom one interacts, imaginatively as much as materially” (204)—with the politics of “arous[ing] ‘social conscience’” in order to “adjust and manipulate” institutions of injustice. What I like about the word “social”

is that it evokes both processes, the imaginative and material work of empathy, solidarity, and rethinking of one's identity *and* the process of effecting systemic change because of this identification.

In fact, both Harrington and Leong, when discussing “docupoetry” and “documental” poetry, refer to “social documentary,” thereby revealing that this term has already been used in scholarship about contemporary poetics but without much critical attention. I wish to adopt and reflect upon this already existing and useful term to clarify why *social* documentary poetry and poetics are distinguishable from documentary poetry and poetics in general:

- Rather than making use of obscure, alienating, or decontextualized sources or allusions,¹² *social* documentary poetry and poetics typically draw from local, often publicly available materials, such as court testimonies, newspapers, speeches, political cartoons, interviews, and television advertisements. When these poets do draw from more obscure, historical, or academic sources, it is always done alongside the sampling of more local or public materials, or people's experiences in their own words. In addition, the most successful¹³ social documentary poems typically offer in some way a context for understanding such samplings or re-mixings of sources.
- *Social* documentary poetry is often produced through various types of social work, in the sense that the authors conduct their own fieldwork or interviews *or* comb through the fieldwork and interviews of others to connect with people and communities. Authors participating in such social work thus engage their communities (either in person or through research) on multiple levels and over long periods of time—writing about, for, with, and at times even from vulnerable spaces and populations.

- Poets who engage in *social* documentary fieldwork use their observations, findings, or interviews to bear witness to an experience and, when the results of the fieldwork are integrated into a poem, to help construct a testifying document so that a record of this experience and the subject will exist. This new documentary poem will function as an archive of human experience that might not otherwise have been known, remembered, or valued, and it will reveal humanity “at the grips with conditions neither necessary nor permanent, conditions of a certain time and place, [such as] racial discrimination, police brutality, unemployment, the Depression, etc.” (Stott 20).
- Like the documentary photography and book traditions of the 1930s and 40s, many successful contemporary *social* documentary poetic projects engage their audience on an emotional level by including the “human document,” as in an image of someone immediately connected to a particular event, which in the 1930s and 40s was intended to help a reader know and feel the details of another life—to feel oneself part of some other’s experience, and almost instantaneously. The “human document” carries a sense of urgency and an awareness of time, so that readers’ feelings, thoughts, and reflections can be quickly grounded even as the compositional study of the images and texts may take time due to their overall defamiliarizing nature. The “human document” is intended to forge connections between, rather than alienate, its audiences.
- *Social* documentary poetry and poetics often have a sense of purpose and audience in mind (beyond the self or academia); they do not prioritize autobiography, though they will at times employ autobiography in service of the social work. There is thus a social function to this work, which implies both a movement inward (for both the poet and the reader), possibly leading to a change in consciousness, and a movement outward (for

both the poet and the reader), toward a change in personal behavior and/or political action. This action might look like a reformist intervention (as in the Progressive-era politics that both informed and responded to much of the documentary work at the turn of the 20th century) or revolutionary upheaval (as in the anti-capitalist charges in Mark Nowak's essays and poems, which were created in part by union members and which are shared at union events). A dynamic relationship thus exists between the authors, subjects, readers, and source material—*how* the poet invites this relationship and dialectic *at the level of the text* will be the focus of my remaining chapters.

These parameters suggest that, for *social* documentary poetry and poetics, *how* sources are collected is as important as the *types* of sources that are collected. To echo the sentiments of early documentarians in photography, film, and poetry: the *doing* of the work matters.

Unlike some of these early documentary works, however, most contemporary social documentary poetry is concerned less with objectively describing or documenting the “texture of actuality,” as was often the purported case in the documentary tradition of the first half of the twentieth century, and more with recording individual experiences—and how these subjective experiences relate to a particular narrative that cannot actually be fully known or understood. Too, as alluded to in my discussions of Agee and Rukeyser, much contemporary social documentary poetry is self-reflexive, highly conscious of the “paradoxical impossibility and simultaneous necessity to represent, to communicate, [and] to speak of” lived experiences (Schweizer 3). Given that many social documentary books represent historical tragedy and individually-experienced suffering, these texts often explore “the problematic relationship between suffering and language” (Schweizer 3), since the lived experience of suffering is, according to poet and scholar M.A.R. Habib, “the most private, and most primordial, experience.

Its very nature is such that it cannot be communicated to others, except in the most compromised modes of expression: pictures, photographs, gestures, breathing, and the vast heritage of rationally ordered concepts.” Thus, much contemporary social documentary writing is conspicuously conscious of its limitations as a medium, thereby echoing, either in form or content, the agonized warnings of James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, even as it explores and forges “‘shared connective spaces’ . . . in a culture where language is debased and deracinated by mass media” (Sewell 7).

The forging of these “shared connective spaces” is ultimately about forming and re-forming our cultural memories. While I do not rely on the terms Michael Leong uses to discuss documentary poetics in his *Contested Records*, his explanation of cultural memory and its relation to documentary praxis is crisp and insightful. He clarifies that cultural memory is “nongenetic information that is formed, preserved, transmitted, and adapted over time” (Leong 2), and it “takes place within a contested discursive terrain in which shared knowledge and practices of meaning-making come in and out of focus” (2). This “shared knowledge and practice of meaning-making” is mediated by ideological state apparatuses, including “archives, libraries, museums, historical societies, governments, schools, universities, arts organizations, news outlets, social media platforms, and publishers” (2). Because the amount of information produced by these institutions exceeds our meaning- and memory-making capacity, the ability to return to the documents mediated by these institutions (to expose, re-remember, challenge, revise, or add to) is a crucial act *against forgetting*. Leong rightly concludes that documentary poetics offer “a kind of counter-intelligence [that] aspires to a history by other means to see if our papers—the documents that underwrite our individual and collective identities, that support

our cultural memories—are in order or need reordering” (4). Following Mark Nowak’s conclusions about documentary praxis,¹⁴ Leong ambitiously (though correctly) claims:

If bureaucracy and documentation have the power to traumatize through the exercise of state power, then a [documentary] poetics can function as a counterhegemonic, unofficial, and demotic practice that authenticates marginalized experiences at the fringes of our cultural memory. (Leong, *Contested*...4)

While Leong sees avant-garde poetry as the site of such counterhegemonic work, I suggest that poets who are known for their formal experimentation or “uncreative writing” and poets who return to traditional forms or more narrative modes in their documentary poetry all have the potential to challenge mainstream ideologies and language forms that suppress the voices and experiences of vulnerable and marginalized people.

In the next section I discuss two contemporary social documentary books of poetry to apply the various concepts and terminology that I have discussed in the first three sections of Chapter One. The first text is C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (2003), a collaboration with photographer Deborah Luster, whose original and stunning portraits grace the pages of the book. The second book, which also invites readers to imaginatively travel to Louisiana, is Cynthia Hogue’s *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina* (2010), a collaboration with photographer Rebecca Ross, whose images reveal a New Orleans not showcased in popular media. Their collaborative efforts, research processes, fieldwork, and focus on labor clearly position their projects in the social documentary tradition of the 1930s and 40s and make unique interventions into the field of labor and poetry studies. Wright’s poetics often favor non-linear, formally experimental poetic narratives, while Hogue’s (at least in *When the Water Came*) rely more on traditional narrative structures even as she remixes answers to interview questions,

which uncover patterns of violence and injustice. Still, both poets practice what I call textual solidarity: their relational composition strategies lead the poet and reader to identify with the people about whom they are writing and reading, to authenticate and uplift their voices, and to serve as a model for solidarity action in the here-and-now.

Part 4:

**Social Documentary Poetry and Textual Solidarity in *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*
and *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina***

The social documentary book, *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*, was published in 2003 as a collaborative effort between C.D. Wright, Deborah Luster, and dozens of incarcerated men and women in maximum- and minimum-security prisons in Louisiana. In Wright's introduction to the 2007 edition of this project (which only includes poetry and no photographs), she announces her anxiety about such a project, aware that her partner's camera and her own poetic lens, as Susan Sontag might suggest in *On Photography*, is a type of colonizing force that invades the space of a marginalized population. In fact, Wright writes in her 1998 book of poetry *Deepstep Come Shining* that "The eye is a mere mechanical instrument" (73), though in *One Big Self*, she engages in a poetic project that stages text and image in surprising ways to help her readers "learn to see" the disremembered and invisible populations, to see them not as passive objects, but as acting subjects. Wright sees an ethical imperative in uniting her poetic subjects with their surroundings and contexts. This book incorporates the technology of the photograph to literally make visible the invisible, revealing the details that the average eye cannot detect, or because of ideological impulses, *will* not detect. Through a complex appropriation and staging of prisoner testimony, prison records, excerpts from print material, and portraits of prisoners, we begin to see the connections between unemployment, crime, and desperation, as well as the potential for human growth and change. Thus, in Wright's and Luster's collaboration, the advancements in technology and embrace of poetry by other means that we see in the twenty-first century intersect with our contemporary need to speak against systemic racial and economic injustices that have been perpetuated by capitalism and a neoliberal world order. *One Big Self* is truly a social documentary work that relies upon a relational poetics, what I consider to be a move toward textual solidarity, a more politicized term.

The economic realities of Louisiana are poetically drawn throughout Luster's introduction and Wright's poetry. Luster notes that, after being commissioned by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities to "document [Louisiana's] northeast parishes," she drove "around on Delta roads looking for inspiration." After wondering where all the people were, she saw a "small prison" and thought, "Maybe this is where the people live." Her assumption is supported by her collaborative project with Wright. The economic devastation of northeastern Louisiana and the subsequent prison industry are highlighted in Wright's poetic fragments. She writes in "Dear Dying Town," calling to mind the documented poverty and devastation of the Midwest in 1930s FSA projects, "the box factories all moved offshore...but we have an offer from the Feds to make nerve gas...the bids are out to attract a nuclear dump; and there's talk of a supermax" (Wright). The poem reveals that in the wake of increasing unemployment and outsourcing of jobs, the seemingly only remaining work is to prepare for terrible war, for a health and environmental disaster, and for shopping at corporatized retail chains. Much of the thematic content in these poems, then, is decidedly anti-capitalist, particularly as the poems reflect upon the absence of work (or the presence of it in prison for wages well below the minimum in each state).

However, *One Big Self* exposes an even more sinister response to economic devastation: in the middle of the book, Wright reveals what she has learned about Lake Providence: it was the "Last town in America to get rotary phones / town under curfew" and that "[t]he real poor part of Lake Providence," houses "Epps Industrial Park: West Carroll Detention Center; that's it for industry." Wright's suggestion—and indeed, her method is suggestion, with fragments of observations left for her readers to make sense of—is that poverty is criminalized, with curfews imposed, and the only big business afforded to the "real poor part" of the state is the prison

industry. Luster's prose introduction to the photo-documentary project compliments and contextualizes Wright's poetic suggestions, noting that "Louisiana incarcerates more of its population than any other state in the Union. The United States incarcerates more of its population than any other country in the free world."

Wright and Luster conclude their documentary book with another contextualizing note, clarifying that their "aim is not to connect particular perpetrators to particular victims but to convey a cultural landscape of violent activity, its consequences, its toll. This is clearly not a systematic document but one photographer's and one poet's unreserved, subjective views of an American institution, indeed, and American phenomenon." Deliberately vague, their statement alludes to "perpetrators," "victims," and "violent activity," and had this statement been placed at the beginning of the book, readers might assume that "perpetrators" refers to inmates, "victims" to the people allegedly or actually harmed by the inmates, and "violent activity" as that which may have been committed by the inmates. However, Wright and Luster leave it to their project to destabilize their readers' assumptions about the prison system and the men and women who inhabit the concrete buildings that make up this system. Without romanticizing or excusing the events that led to the men's and women's incarceration, Wright and Luster allow their subjects' complexity, contradictions, beauty, and indeed their humanity to spill on to the pages. At the same time, they suggest that the prison system is part of a larger economic system that has failed, and continues to fail people, especially in areas where poverty is concentrated. Readers are thus prepared to consider that an economic system and the "eyes of the free world viewer" are perpetrators of violent activity, complicit in creating such a "cultural landscape of violent activity."

To counter the alienating effects of this capitalist economic system—indeed, we have been alienated from these incarcerated men and women just as they are being alienated from each other and their own potential while in prison—Wright and Luster employ certain techniques to allow for solidarity between them as artists, us as readers, and the incarcerated men and women. This is a kind of textual solidarity, a way of doing composition that both models and inspires connection-making and community-building so we are no longer alienated from each other, and so we can begin forging and liberating our collective memories. In terms of Wright’s poetry, this textual solidarity is most achieved through surprising juxtapositions (especially of interviewees’ words), lists (especially anaphorized “counting” lists), and Wright’s contextualizing statements (which themselves are poetically rendered). In “First Memory,” for example, Wright layers sentiments of tenderness that resonate emotionally with readers who can likewise imagine their own earliest memories. One woman recalls “[h]er and her cousin playing house with a cardboard box: grass was greens, grasshoppers was meat, mud was bread.” This memory was given new life in the context of *One Big Self*: a childhood memory, perhaps buried until asked about, is released and archived in Wright’s lyrical epic. This private memory is thus now liberated, part of our collective memories of childhood joy, and her experience is one with which readers now identify (hence the social work of this excerpt).

This brief glimpse into this inmate’s past reveals a hopefulness and creativity too-often absent from prison routines, which frequently center around counting, as recorded throughout the book, including on the same page as the memory of playing house:

Count the days of summer ahead

Count the years you finished school

Count the jobs you don’t qualify to hold

Count the smokes you've got left

Count the friends you've got on the inside

Count the ones who've already fallen

The innocence of the memory gives way to the monotonous experience of reality, a description of which is offered in short lines that begin with mono-syllabic words to emphasize the mantra-like repetition of prison life, repetition that reminds inmates of what they lack, be it the jobs they have been denied, presumably because of the lack of education they have received, or even the number of friends and cigarettes they have left.

But Wright and Luster refuse to allow their readers to view the inmates—or the inmates to view themselves—in terms of what they lack. The most obvious counter to the view of inmates as lacking is the inclusion of photographs, where Luster and Wright avoid presenting the incarcerated men and women merely as passive victims of violence meant for our pity, or as perpetrators of violence. The surprising juxtapositions of information in the poetry and among the photograph-poetry relationship gesture toward the inmates' "big selves." Versions of the expression, "nothing and no one is bad forever," for example, are repeated throughout the poems, first uttered by the self-described "shy bible-reading" inmate; this observation seems to be one of the most striking themes of the work. In "Just Another Day," for instance, Wright is "at the iron pile" with men "benching 450 and squatting 600." Just as one man comments that it's "hotter...than my thirteen-year-old niece," Wright observes "[o]ne young man patiently braid[ing] / the head of another." Wright's eye and ear for detail, and her lack of reservation to present the contradictions she experiences, the contradictions at the heart of humanity, allow her to write these bodies back to life, to force us to see moments of tenderness amid jarring comments. Yet another man with multiple tattoos strikes Wright's poetic attention. He confesses

that he “jugged [a woman’s] jugular,” but Wright interjects in this poem that it is the “ongoingness of things that so impresses [her, as] / The old dirty-word tattoos [on the man’s body] are blotted over by a blur of birds.” The “ongoingness,” as Wright calls it, reflects the human capacity for survival, resilience, change, growth, reflection, and forgiveness, a capacity that “prison realty,” as she refers to it in a later poem, does not acknowledge. Wright’s and Luster’s documentary book reveals that unemployment, the for-profit prison industry, and the criminalization of the poor are part of a culture of violence perpetuated by an economic system that has failed countless people, and the fragmented language and staged documents (including photographs) do not merely reflect a fragmented society; rather, they enable the kind of connection-making needed to begin restructuring society. Theirs is a textual solidarity that is intended to move readers, presumably in a position of relative privilege, to feel, think, struggle, relate, identify, and therefore work to read more, feel more, and act more.

Too, Wright and Luster are aware that some previous efforts to document marginalized populations “used people in relative power to photograph people positioned as ‘lacking’ and as ‘passive and pathetic objects’ capable only of offering themselves to the transcendent gaze of the camera” (Tagg 12). Their corrective to this tendency in documentary work is to invite the men and women to tell their stories—and to stage their own photographs, posing themselves for the camera’s eye. In their interview with NPR’s Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva (*The Kitchen Sisters*), Wright and Luster explain that the men and women at times “want[ed] to hold something like a box of valentine candy or a family photo,” though Luster was careful to remove “any sort of sign of prison life” from the background since she “didn’t want that to get in the way of the person [she] was photographing,” for she wanted to highlight the person as he or she wanted to be seen,

in all of their beautiful humanity. Of the photograph of “Bolottie” (see figure 2), one of the initial images in the book, Wright says:

This man who is scarred so badly...He was so dignified. He was beautiful, really. He had green eyes. He always looked absolutely, directly at the camera. I found him very striking. Not just because he was so scarred, but because of the dignity he brought to his very disfigured face.



Figure 2: Luster, Deborah. “Bolottie.” 2000. Transylvania, LA. *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*, by C.D. Wright and Deborah Luster, Twin Palms Pub., 2003.

This dignity in self-presentation is characteristic of all the photographs in the book, even as many inmates chose to pose themselves in their work detail uniforms. For example, “People in culinary arts [including Bonita Jethro] wore big baker hats and white jackets” (Nelson and Silva), thereby affirming their identity as individuals who nourish others (see figure 3):



Figure 3: Luster, Deborah. *Bonita Jethro*. 1999. St. Gabriel, LA. *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*, by C.D. Wright and Deborah Luster, Twin Palms Pub., 2003.

Wright's and Luster's willingness to step back and invite the men and women to self-represent, to self-identify in their photographs, is just one strategy they use to counter the totalizing narratives about incarcerated men and women popularized in the media; their strategy likewise confronts the documentary tradition's manipulation and exploitation of vulnerable bodies to get the most compelling or provocative photo for ideological purposes, often in service of the status quo, rather than pushing against it. Wright and Luster begin their project with a social encounter: the people and the information that they share; the produced work is likewise social, in service of and in solidarity with the people with whom they worked. Overall, *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* serves as an archive of memories and experiences that would otherwise remain invisible, separated from our collective consciousness. But the book presents the faces and stories of incarcerated men and women, faces that are no longer visible to the public but who exist nonetheless—as mothers, fathers, children, and as laborers. Within the book

their invisibility is linked to economic injustice, but the documents in and of *One Big Self* both dignify and testify to the existence of these faces, these very living beings.

Just a few years after *One Big Self*'s publication, scholar and poet Cynthia Hogue collaborated with photographer Rebecca Ross to produce *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina*, five years after the hurricane and shattered levees devastated the Gulf Coast. Hogue's poems seek to record patterns of violence and memories of Katrina, rather than reporting on the disaster in real-time. Her method of investigation (interviewing) is not at all text-based in the way Joseph Harrington or Michael Leong conceptualize, though it does situate her directly in the tradition of the documentary projects of the 1930s and 40s. Her "interview poems," as she calls them, are formed out of the empathetic acts of deep witnessing and listening where she observes (listens to and testifies to) the poetic voices of the Katrina evacuees. However, unlike social documentary books from the thirties, Hogue's project is comprised entirely of words spoken by thirteen Katrina evacuees whom she interviewed. In a 2010 blog post that followed the publication of the book, Hogue emphasizes the ethics and process of giving literal space for the evacuees' stories to be seen, heard, and witnessed in their own words. She explains:

They [the evacuees who participated in *When the Water Came*] wanted their story heard in their own words and not framed by my thoughts, [so] I took pains to ensure that each person I interviewed had access to the work in progress, was kept in the loop as it developed, was consulted for the accuracy of the material, and asked whether they were comfortable being a part of the project or wished to withdraw... All interview-poems appear in the book only with the formal permission of each evacuee. ("On Writing...")

Hogue's social documentary project, then, seems to respond to Agee's own anguish about his production of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* when he writes, "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, *records of speech...*" (10, emphasis added).

Certainly one of the main features of *When the Water Came*—and central to its beauty—is the record of speech it relies upon, encodes, and transmits. As a record of speech, it attends to stories that might have been drowned out by mainstream, sensationalized stories about the disaster given that Hogue integrates only the words and stories of her participants. However, rather than mimic such voices in a fictionalized account of Katrina, or record quotations about Katrina in feature-length story, Hogue draws from her experience as a poet (specifically, a poet who has "schooled" herself in the field of "poetics of witness"¹⁵) and chooses lineation as the primary tool to construct a record of speech; in doing so, she highlights the implicit *poetry* of the evacuees' testimonials by providing a "forum in which their voices might be audible, particularized, and dignified by the poetic measure [she] heard in their words" ("On Writing..."). The poetry of this language is highlighted by the lineations and surprising juxtapositions between images and sounds throughout the individual poems.

Thus, unlike the written portions of the social documentary books of the thirties, the language included in *When the Water Came* is poetic language, though this language has not been constructed from the poet's imagination. The interviewees become authors of their own subjective stories in this text; as such, *When the Water Came* artfully moves between the poetic, performative, and observational documentary modes outlined by Bill Nichols in his *Introduction to Documentary*. Most surprising, though, is that Hogue's observations are unconventional within the documentary tradition: as the poet, she does not observe visible things (like clothing,

hair, or housing accommodations); instead, Hogue observes with her ears and documents the cadences, inflections, and musicality of distinct *voices*. The record of speech that Hogue produces is thus decidedly polyvocal.

Ross's portraits of the interviewed evacuees, too, call to mind the work of 1930s documentarians, including Lewis Hine, Margaret Bourke-White, and Walker Evans. Consciously intervening in this documentary tradition, however, Ross's photos (like Luster's) were created in collaboration with the photographed subjects, just as the poems were created in collaboration with the interview participants. The photographs also move within the observational and performative documentary modes since the lines between subject and author are blurred. Hogue's and Ross's deliberate, political acts of stepping back, of inviting the subjects of their poems and photographs to become agents who help construct the art by recalling their subjective experiences before, during, and after the hurricane, is an essential element of the form of this text: it was created by *multiple* people with *multiple* voices.

If we examine the book's table of contents, we see that the poems are titled by the interviewed evacuees' names. We might expect, then, that the poems will be *about* these particular people, that Hogue and Ross are representing what they as authors saw and discovered. However, once we turn to the first poem, our expectation of objective reportage about James Davidson is immediately unsettled in the first line of the poem in which the first-personal pronoun, "I," is used. Thus, this poem is not just *about* James Davidson; the poem's content and diction is largely *by* James Davidson. Moreover, this glance at the first poem of the book reveals that beneath the poems' titles are job descriptions of the individuals associated with the poem. The Katrina survivors are thus identified by name and a description of their (past or present) labor. For example, Kid Merv is identified as a (musician) and Sally Cole as a (writer). Anna

Veprinska, author of the provocative article, “Empathetic Witnessing in Charles Reznikoff’s *Holocaust* and Cynthia Hogue and Rebecca Ross’s *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina*,” suggests that such “parenthetical characterization(s)” of the poems’ speakers is “simultaneously identifying and limiting” (321). Veprinska’s claim that these identifying characterizations are “limiting” is not fully developed in her article, but I would suggest that the identifiers do not *limit* our understanding of the evacuees identities; rather, the parentheticals *organize* our understanding of their identities around labor and economic factors that informed the way these survivors experienced Katrina.

In reviewing the poems’ titles and parenthetical identifiers, we see that Hogue welcomes the voices of people who inhabit diverse subject-positions. We discover that the evacuees are professors, Vietnam veterans, former Winn-Dixie employees, casino bartenders, and artists; they are mothers, administrative assistants, fire alarm dispatchers, musicians, writers, and retired auto mechanics. We likewise read narratives by and about a mother who was responsible for keeping fourteen people safe through the storm and evacuation (36); the middle-class men and women who lost their homes and savings because their insurance providers “refused to pay out” (30); a man whose family’s financial stability was threatened when he “was fired for failure / to come back to work in the hurricane” (47); and a professor who, a few months after Katrina, held class online—her students scattered throughout the country—to discuss *King Lear*, “a play with characters lost / in a storm” (65). By transmitting the experiences of such a diverse sampling of Katrina evacuees, Hogue and Ross highlight the importance of testifying “to individual experiences, what was true for each individual,” rather than focusing of some “objective facts,” thereby allowing “various stories to be in dialogue and proximity” (Bal), stories that revolve around work or the ways in which the speakers have been subjected to economic pressures.

Anna Veprinska also claims that the text generalizes the experiences of the interviewees since “these individuals double as representative examples of the Katrina victims outside of the text” (320). However, there is no textual evidence that the evacuees are meant to “function as synecdoche for the larger community of Katrina-affected individuals” (Veprinska 320). In fact, the juxtaposition of interviewee name, labor description, and then individual story highlights the subjective experiences of the evacuees. Thus, the narrative about the woman who kept fourteen people alive during the evacuation was *Victoria Green’s narrative*. Hogue’s and Ross’s dialogic text in which multiple voices speak in their own words and in which diverse people from varying social positions help frame their portraits intervenes in the social documentary book tradition, but it also intervenes in conversations about the effects of Hurricane Katrina that were printed and aired in mainstream media and academia. Hogue suggests in a 2008 online interview with Jennifer Bal that, whereas some academic disciplines risk reducing the “individual voice and experience...into a statistic,” and whereas straight news reportage is often more interested in catastrophe and sound bites, art has the potential to “fill in the record of the embodied experience,” to remind readers that *real* people experienced *real* trauma. Hogue’s poems, combined with Ross’s photographs, suggest that, while all Katrina evacuees have been traumatized by the hurricanes and flood, “depending on whether they left, whether they lost their houses, whether they stayed, depending on whether they had resources after the flood...they weren’t all impacted in the same ways. They didn’t make the same kind of sense of what happened to them” (Bal). *When the Water Came*, with its twelve interview poems about and by thirteen Katrina evacuees, seeks to “*retain* the individual voice and *honor* the details of individual experience” (Bal; emphasis added).

Hogue and Ross further highlight the evacuees' individual experiences through their integration of the "human document" of the photograph, but in particular, the portraits of each Katrina evacuee; these images, on their most basic level, help readers visualize the human beings with and about whom Hogue writes. The inclusion of these "human documents" again position *When the Water Came* directly in the tradition of the social documentary book of the 1930s. Catherine Gander explains that 1930s documentary photography paid "close attention to the human face" to help viewers visualize and feel the experience of another (26), as these faces bore "both 'the expression of tragedy' and 'the ability to endure'" (26). These Depression-era photographs, however, did function synecdochally where the portraits of the "dispossessed" were presented as "representative types" (27), which were in turn meant to tell a "collective 'story' of a nation" (28). Many portraits were presented anonymously; in fact, FSA photographers "rarely [even] asked the subjects their names" (28).

Hogue and Ross participate in this tradition of including documentary portraits that capture and communicate expressions of tragedy and endurance. However, unlike many FSA photographs, the portraits in *When the Water Came* are not anonymous: every photo-poetic sequence is titled with the interviewee's name. Too, the portraits afford the interviewees agency since they participate in the construction and approval of their images. For example, James Davidson—an artist—stares directly at the camera, straight into his readers' eyes, demanding that we not turn our faces from his. Still, in the corners of our own eyes we can see Davidson's face framed by dozens of books blurred in the background. Importantly, Davidson's face does not fade into the background; instead, the blurred books accentuate his facial features, suggesting that his face, his identity, are worthy of view, of empathetic witnessing. Much like Agee and Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Hogue and Ross have *developed* a relationship with

their subjects—they do not merely *posit* a relationship with them. This relationship is characterized by acts of solidarity in which the interviewees participate in the construction of their poetic and visual identities.

Most critics celebrated *When the Water Came* after its publication, in part because the project collapses boundaries between artist and subject. Anna Veprinska, however, has offered a more cynical analysis of the book. She acknowledges that the process used to create these poems and photographs certainly “invites...empathy” (323), but she argues that the portraits in *When the Water Came* are actually “exploitative” (323), mainly because the images have been aestheticized. About the portrait of Victoria Green, the “mother of four,” Veprinska claims: “the act of photographing this woman...necessarily objectifies her, transforms her story and image into art” (322). Veprinska is not entirely incorrect: the portraits of Victoria Green, James Davidson, and all Katrina evacuees interviewed for this project are rendered artfully, and the photographs are *objects* for reflection, *documents* of study. Veprinska implies that acts of representation via art fail because art necessarily objectifies (we can thus surmise what she would say about the portraits included in *One Big Self*). But does this mean that the poor, marginalized, and oppressed can never be subjects of art? Does the artful object always objectify and exploit? The social documentary book tradition of Agee, Evans, Rukeyser and Williams would argue that we must continue doing the work of representation, but by focusing on *how* the art is created, and what compositional strategies are used to avoid such objectification and exploitation. Developing a relationship with a dispossessed group, listening to their stories and voices, and staging their portraits and words with the individuals’ consideration and consent reflect a compositional process that values solidarity work that strives to uplift marginalized voices and faces. In doing so, artists like Hogue and Ross have the potential to “praise famous

men” and women, to relegate their stories to the status of monument, or that which carries “the most urgent meaning for us at any present moment” (Guillory 12). In representing evacuees in both poetry and photography, the interviewees’ stories and faces do become objects of study, yes, but precisely because Hogue and Ross understand that they are of monumental importance. The overall compositional strategy of *When the Water Came* is characterized by textual solidarity, and it invites a relationship that is not based on exploitation.

Too, the defamiliarizing technique of staging images and words demands reflection and the slowing down of our reading process, which stands in contrast to the media’s soundbite, sensationalized reporting of Katrina. Monuments, after all, demand our extended attention, our wrestling with the experience that comes from deep witnessing. Such extended attention and deep witnessing require “constructivist reading,” a term I paraphrase from Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas*. Whitman postulates that the reading of literature (especially poetry) has the potential to heal the United States and free it from its materialistic endeavors that steer it farther away from democracy. He writes:

Books are to be call’d for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast’s struggle; that *the reader* is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, *must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay*—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. (81; emphasis added)

Constructivist reading is one response to texts that stage or juxtapose multiple voices, words, or sources in surprising ways; it suggests that art is unfinished without a reader’s active participation. Such participation requires attention, patience, and engagement, what John Dewey referred to as “perception,” or the “deep seeing” that comes from readers’ creative and

constructive processes as they sit with their texts of study. I suggest that Hogue and Ross, through their project's self-reflexivity, call into question the ethics of the documentary book tradition while simultaneously insisting on its ethical merits, particularly in light of their text's demand for the process of "constructivist reading," which adds yet another creative agent in the construction of the poems: the reader.

The process of constructivist reading is necessary to make sense of other images throughout the text as well, particularly those that do not focus on a specific face. These photographs serve as symbols of or visual metaphors for the material—often bodily—losses and emotional devastation experienced during and after Hurricane Katrina *and* how this devastation and loss remind the interviewees of previously experienced emotional and physical violence. For instance, toward the end of the book, Hogue and Ross include an image of "the empty lot where [interviewee Sally Cole's] home stood before Hurricane Katrina" (see figure 4):



Figure 4: Ross, Rebecca. *The Empty Lot Where Sally's Home Stood before Hurricane Katrina*. 2008. New Orleans, LA. *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina*, by Cynthia Hogue and Rebecca Ross, UNO Press, 2010, p. 99.

In this image, not only do we get a sense of what Roland Barthes calls the *studium*, or what is *in* the photograph (its subject); as the caption reads, this is an image of the “empty lot where” a home once stood. This photograph thus literally and metaphorically refers to the material and emotional losses experienced after Katrina. We also see, however, a blurred, shadowy figure near the center of the photograph in the empty lot. This figure is, in Barthes’s terms, the detail that “pricks” (47); it is what we remember “when the photograph is no longer in front of [us] and [we] think back on it” (53). The blurred figure gives rise to the photograph’s *punctum*, which is a “kind of subtle beyond” (59), as if the image extends beyond what we can see. The *punctum* demands our active engagement because our perception or “deep seeing” of the image has been delayed. We have no choice but to sit and work with this photograph, to come up with some way of making sense of it given its placement in the text and given our cultural knowledge.

Most likely the blurred figure is a person walking toward or away from the camera, but it could also be an imperfection in the development of the photo or some other out-of-focus material object. Regardless of the blurred figures’ actual referent, this photograph functions rhetorically to recall the many ghosts of the South: that shadow is the Compson brothers’ fear of miscegenation and Caddy’s muddy drawers. It is slavery, Civil War, Jim Crow, lynching, and race riots. That shadow is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the terrifying embodiment of the willfully and ideologically forgotten. The suggestion or fictional embodiment of such shadows, as in the construction of *Beloved* in Morrison’s novel, gives these apparitions a textual dwelling place in which to reside, and, by our viewing and reading of them, a space to assert their endless presence. Put in the context of what Hurricane Katrina meant to some residents of New Orleans,

including interviewee Catherine Loomis, that shadow calls to mind a tragedy everyone knew would happen. Loomis explains:

New Orleans asked urban planners
to look at maps and tell us where
we should and shouldn't rebuild.
"Let people live here,"
they said, and: "Don't let them
live there." If you overlay
a racial map of the city,
so many houses owned by blacks
are where no one should ever
have built neighborhoods. So now
we have exactly what we feared." (65)

The shadow in "the empty lot" thereby breaks the frame of the photograph as it alludes to that which is not present in the image itself—institutionalized racism and classism that exacerbated the horror of the hurricane—while it simultaneously calls attention to the difficulty and impossibility of addressing the lived experiences of suffering, particularly with respect to race in the South. This reproduced photograph suggests that the full extent of the horror and suffering grounding the events leading up to, during, and after Hurricane Katrina are, ultimately, unspeakable and unrepresentable. They are a blur, as in the shadowy figure in this photograph, and cannot be fully known or understood, as our mediums for translating such experiences are ultimately inadequate. At the same time, we *must* wrestle with this blur to approach any understanding of the suffering it suggests and to begin to name the racism and white supremacy at the heart of the economic system that led to the unnatural disaster of Katrina's aftermath.

Thus, the relationship between photograph and poem in *When the Water Came* is not merely illustrative or descriptive; instead, Hogue and Ross weave images (be they text- or photo-based) through the poetry and photographs, and the relationship between these repeated images is reciprocal. Each appearance of a related image expands upon or challenges the previous, and as

readers we are left to assemble these images, to deduce their relational and reciprocal qualities, and meaning depends upon this constructivist assemblage practice. In his recent critical history, *Photopoetry, 1845-2015*, Michael Nott suggests—via Nicole Boulestreau—that, in “photopoetry” in general, ““meaning progresses in accordance with the reciprocity of writing and figures...through alternating restitchings of the signifier into text and image”” (qtd. in Nott 18).¹⁶ Our understanding of many of Ross’s photographs depends upon such “restitchings”: the image of the blurred figure in *The Empty Lot Where Sally’s Home Stood Before Hurricane Katrina*, for example, becomes clearer to us because of the information and images in the poetry. By the time this photographic image appears in *When the Water Came*, we have already experienced poetic images that highlight the systemic racism that exacerbated Katrina: a Black woman from the Lower 9th Ward drowning because the “water came up / so *fast*” (Hogue and Ross 20); a Black man accosted by “State troopers” for being in the presence of a white woman on the side of a road (94); and a “racial map” of New Orleans that reveals that “so many houses owned by blacks / are where no one should ever / have built neighborhoods” (65). Too, the blurred figure in the photographic image suggests that other men and women are not mentioned in the poetry—men and women who have not yet come into focus in our collective imaginations but nevertheless continue to be impacted by white supremacy’s enduring legacy in the US. By reading the photographs through the poetic images and the poetry through the photographic images, the reader participates in the imaginative work needed to construct meaning in the text, to trace the “stitchings...in order to make productive connections between” them (Nott 19). This dynamic relationship between image and text and the imaginative work required of the readers persist throughout the book.

Both *One Big Self* and *When the Water Came* offer contemporary examples of social documentary books. These works employ various strategies to engage in collective memory building as readers are pushed to bear witness to the complex beings incarcerated in Louisiana prisons and are invited to share in the tremendous stories of endurance, survival, and resilience of Katrina evacuees. Together, the documentary projects expose (albeit indirectly via sampled and staged language) the racism and classism that ground the Prison Industrial Complex, predatory corporations, neighborhood planning committees, and basic infrastructure design. These documentary books are *social* because of their socially engaged themes and because the artists took extensive time to engage with and understand their subjects, so much so that their subjects helped construct the poetry and the photographic compositions. In the case of *One Big Self*, paper copies of the photographs were also shared with the incarcerated men and women, who in some cases were able to reconnect with estranged family members through their own sharing of their collaboratively-constructed images of themselves. Luster notes:

“There was a woman who asked to be photographed...She said ‘I’ve been here 15 years. I’m down for 99 years. I have 19 children. My children haven’t spoken to me since I came to prison. Perhaps if I had some photographs I could send them it would soften their hearts to me.’ A few months later she said, ‘Four of my children came to visit me. The baby came and he’s nineteen. He was five years old when I came to prison.’” (Nelson and Silva)

As social documentarians in these two texts, Wright, Luster, Hogue, and Ross employ what I call “textual solidarity,” which largely informs their overall poetics. In the collection of information and material for their books, in the strategies used to compose their poems and photographs, and in the social work that followed from their compositions, these poets and photographers move

beyond their desire to understand and empathize with their subjects (though they certainly strive for this as well). By listening to and honoring the voices of their poetic subjects, by allowing their narrative frames and textual samples to contextualize the books' thematic content, and by juxtaposing surprising stories and textual samples, the authors stand in solidarity with their subjects. At times, the authors create space for their subjects to assert their agency over their self-representations, and they produce lasting books that unquestionably challenge the institutions and capitalist structures that enable, produce, and rely on racism and classism. Their projects remind us of James Agee's declaration from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that "every human being is potentially capable...of fully 'realizing' his potentialities; that is, his being cheated and choked of it, is infinitely the ghastliest, commonest, and most inclusive of all the crimes of which the human world can accuse itself" (271). Agee's provocative statement reminds us that human beings who are displaced by floods caused by the bursting of inadequately-constructed levees and thoughtless city planning, and human beings whose lives are stolen from them with life sentences or state-sanctioned murder, are worthy of monumental status—our view, our attention, our deep listening, and our perception. Their stories become part of our memories, and these deeply felt memories, released into our collective consciousness, have been liberated in part because of the social documentary work of Wright, Luster, Hogue, and Ross.

In the next four sections of Chapter Two I read Chris Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911* as a social documentary book that is a fitting companion to *One Big Self* and *When the Water Came*. I suggest, however, that the textual solidarity at work in Wright's and Hogue's poetry about laboring subjects is extended in Llewellyn's *Fragments*. Hers is an internationalist textual solidarity, which means that at the level of the text, she pushes us to forge connections between her readers, individuals in the

United States, and those throughout the globe. Llewellyn's internationalist working-class perspective presented a challenge to the rise of neoliberal policies in the 1980s, and it continues to challenge the protectionist policies that took on new life when Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, the same year that the third edition of Llewellyn's book was reprinted after being unavailable for over two decades.

Chapter Two:

**Lived Experience, the Politics of Memory, and Internationalist Textual Solidarity
in Chris Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of
March 25, 1911***

The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are co-equal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative.

~ James Agee, "Preface," *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Chris Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory of March 25, 1911* does not follow the 1930s precedent of documenter going out into the world to record what she sees; instead, Llewellyn's book seeks to document the events leading up to, during, and after the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of 1911 *decades after* the great tragedy in New York City. Llewellyn has not collaborated with a specific person or persons to gather photographs for the book; rather, she has sifted through a limited supply of images from the early twentieth century to garner a range of photographs. Further, unlike the documentary photographers and journalists of the 30s—who were able to speak directly to their subjects—Llewellyn ultimately relies on secondary source material, as her poems are comprised of earlier traces of the past. The book, first published in 1987 and again, slightly revised in 1993 and in 2016, intersperses select biblical passages, photographs, and twenty-six poems, which are themselves comprised of primary and secondary historical documents, such as excerpts from the trial following the Triangle Fire, interviews with survivors, short poems written by victims of the fire, and eye-witness accounts by reporters at the scene of the fire. Together, the poems and photographs tell a story about the fire and its aftermath (loosely following the structure of Leon Stein's nonfiction novel, *Triangle Fire*) and about the women and girls who worked there, whereas the bible verses collectively function as a “powerful rhetorical means for expressing solidarity with the workers, for indicting a predatory, profit-driven means of production” (Kovacik 147). *Fragments from the Fire* is thus a social documentary book precisely because it *makes use of documents to document an historical event to inspire some type of social change*. I suggest in the following sections that, while *Fragments from the Fire* moves in the tradition of the social documentary book of the 1930s, the terrain Llewellyn traverses in order to “make claims on the living” is that of memory (Zandy, “Fire Poetry” 51). Often out-of-focus, sometimes unreliable, memory shifts as it engages

with lived experiences, stories and records about these experiences, politics, and ideology. Thus, the memory of a particular event is never singular. Historical information certainly enters these memories, and the work of historians provides frameworks within which and out of which memories grow, fade, or are nourished, but the work of postmodern and other theorists of the past forty years has shown us that history is ultimately a construct, never entirely objective even though the historian often strives to master objectivity.

Llewellyn's poetic text, with its focus on memories of the fire, rather than a "pure" history, demonstrates her awareness that her text, even as it engages with historical information, will necessarily be ideologically inflected, since memories are shaped by and in the many records that seek to tell a story of the fire. For instance, Llewellyn implicitly meditates on the memories of the Triangle Fire that are embedded in her selected documents, but she also constructs new memories of the fire in her poetic reconstruction of the events surrounding it. In this way Llewellyn resembles the historical materialist described in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Contrary to the universal historian, whose "method," according to Benjamin, is "additive...and musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time" (Benjamin 262), the vision of the historical materialist "is based on a constructive principle," since materialist historiography "involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well" (262); it "seize[s] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (255). In this "arrest of thoughts" and "seizure of a memory," the historical materialist "recognizes...a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (263). S/he is less concerned, then, with the victor of a tale, whether this victor be an economic system, a nation-state, a policy, or an individual. Instead, the historical materialist focuses all attention on a set of contradictions, tensions, and "lesser" stories ("oppressed" or "suppressed" stories) to "blast a specific era out of the

homogenous course of history...a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework” (263). In this way, the materialist historiographer is a type of midwife who recognizes the tense contractions of a body pregnant with a new life, arrests the progress of a series of events—in all of its violence and creative potential—and intervenes to help bring forth a new “life out of the...lifework.” According to Benjamin, “historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past...to blast open the continuum of history” (262). This “blast” is a locus of change, of progress, and according to Benjamin, of redemption. While I doubt Llewellyn would describe her work in precisely Benjaminian terms, I suggest throughout these sections that her methodology is similar the historical materialist’s as Benjamin defines it in his “Theses.” Llewellyn responds to her own historical moment of the 1980s with a poetic arrest of thought and memory of the Triangle Fire so she can participate in the “revolutionary fight for an oppressed past”; indeed, the book seeks to redeem garment workers from 1911 and, equally importantly, the memories of working-class struggle that may inspire her own readers to participate in the struggle for revolutionary change.

A complete historical retelling of the fire and its aftermath would not lead to such redemption (nor would such an effort even be possible). As Llewellyn notes in an interview with Janet Zandy, “I needed to retell the Triangle Fire in my own way as a poet, not as an historian or scholar. I aspired toward emotional truth in this retelling of the stories of the victims, witnesses, and survivors” (Zandy, “Fire Poetry” 45). Aspiring for “emotional truth,” as Llewellyn calls it, grounds the work of many contemporary writers who seek to present the “essence” of an experience, who attend to the *impression* of an event to clarify the event’s significance to the individuals experiencing or witnessing it. Emotional truth-telling, like materialist historiography, does not involve the repetition of data to report a universal past; instead, it prods the past, seizes

it, and forms it so it might inform the present and usher in a future. Thus, emotional truth-telling might favor what an experience feels like to a specific witness over the repetition of data, facts, or statistics, and in doing so, acknowledges the constructed nature of history; this further suggests that the telling might be marked by confusion, which on the page could be represented in either form or content. Emotional truth-telling is conscious of *how* something is remembered (the arrangement and representation of information) and *why* it is remembered; it, therefore, moves within the realm of ideology while it simultaneously calls attention to the text's own constructedness and limits as a medium of translating and narrating an experience.

Llewellyn's use of the phrase "emotional truth" calls to mind the introduction to Slavoj Žižek's *Violence*, which suggests that the details of traumatic events (like the Triangle Fire) will nearly always be rendered unclear, perhaps inconsistent or incomplete. He notes that the "witness [to trauma who is] able to offer a clear narrative of his...experience would disqualify himself" as a true experiencer of the trauma "by virtue of that clarity" (4).¹⁷ Tim O'Brien's short story cycle, *The Things They Carried*, likewise explores the concept of truth in narrating traumas. In his reflections on narrating the trauma of war, O'Brien writes that, when one tells a war story, "it's difficult to separate what happened and what seemed to happen" (71), but that what *seemed* to happen is truer than the *facts* of the moment. Thus, at times writers make up incidents or rearrange details to help "further clarify and explain" what happened in the *emotional experience* of the event. There is a difference, explains O'Brien, between "story truth" and "happening truth," and sometimes the story truth is actually more truthful to the lived experience. "Story truth" is thus akin to "emotional truth" in that it attempts to capture the essence or spirit of a moment; historical information and facts enter stories and emotional truth when they are relevant to the essence of a moment or experience.

Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire*, a documentary text which is itself a record of historical information, necessarily relies on "story truth" to imagine and convey the experiences of garments workers trapped in a fire: while many details are factually accurate, Llewellyn had no choice but to frame and stage pieces of information to testify to the fear workers must have felt during the fire and to the frustration and anger felt by the thousands of New Yorkers who mobilized against exploitative and unsafe working conditions after the fire. Her book's title further claims that readers will only be able to apprehend "fragments from the fire," referring to scraps of material and personal belongings left behind after the fire, but also to the reality that readers will not be able to access a totalizing history (the "happening truth") of the Triangle Fire—only fragments that speak emotional truth, brought to contemporary readers as memories poetically recorded on the page or embedded in or created by a photograph. Further, her conspicuous¹⁸ decisions to include certain information and documents over others are connected to her desire to convey an emotional truth *and* to her work as an historical materialist.

The sections that follow begin with a thorough explanation and discussion of several key elements of Llewellyn's particular form of historical materialism and documentary poetics—memory, lived experience, and truth-telling—which provides the theoretical framework that grounds my analysis of Llewellyn's documentary poetics. Throughout the sections I address how and why select poems make use of, allude to, or are juxtaposed against primary and secondary historical documents, such as bible passages, photographs, and eye-witness reports from 1911. I also pay particular attention to the relationship between the text's documentary photographs and poems, and I further address how and why Llewellyn's individual poems respond to visual images from 1911 even though these images are not reproduced in the book itself. Like Cara Finnegan in her 2003 study of FSA photography, *Picturing Poverty*, I consider the

interdependence of photographs, other historical documents, poetry, and the context that gave rise to their placement in a single social documentary book. My chapter thus shares some of the basic assumptions about documentary photography that ground Finnegan's *Picturing Poverty*: "documentary photographs are not merely 'evidence,' but are by their very nature rhetorical" and the "photographs cannot productively be separated from the texts they accompany, nor should they be viewed as mere supplements to those texts" (xv).

The following sections, then, most explicitly consider a documentary poetics of relationality in which the historical documents, poetry, and photographs are meant to be understood in relation to each other. This poetics of relationality directly impacts the reading process since the staging of written and visual text demands that readers move from passive spectators of information to critical, active agents in making meaning in the text. It further assumes that active readers are actually part of the text's overall production and performance, as the text requires an audience to act upon it as it acts upon an audience. Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire* thus initiates a performance of documents, readers, and ghosts of the past, thereby "break[ing] down the barriers between active performer and passive audience" (qtd. in Roach 285). Poetics of relationality delay a reader's perception, as ideas and even historical information are defamiliarized, especially when readers consider the interaction between specific poems and photographs. Unlike Russian formalists from the early to mid-twentieth century, who were also concerned with a text's ability to delay a reader's perception, however, I am not interested in measuring the greatness of a work of art; instead, I am interested in how social documentary texts like Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire* invite readers to participate in an ethic of reading and seeing so that they do not become mere spectators or consumers of another's suffering.¹⁹ The reader's active, engaged participation in the textual performance is necessary to *do ethics*, in this

case. But *Fragments from the Fire*'s performance is also a "provocation," to borrow a concept from Joseph Roach, and an "opening" for readers to repeat the reading experience, though with the "inevitability of revision" (Roach 285), since new generations of readers will react to and act upon the text in new ways. "Repetition," in the case of reading and re-reading about the Triangle Fire in Llewellyn's book, is certainly an act of "restoration": the historical fact of the fire is restored through the staging of primary historical documents, but also of "re-creation": the fire is remembered in diverse and ideologically-inflected ways because of the staging of documents and because the readers, also agents in the performance of the text, will interact differently with the material based on their own lived experiences.

Perhaps most significantly, the staging of documentary fragments and the (re)framing of scenes from the fire has the potential to "re-create" the relationship between audience and textual subject as well since readers may identify with a collective that may have been foreign to them before the reading experience. In this way, Llewellyn's materialist historiographical approach to the social document book tradition "restores" the spirit or soul of a larger working-class collective by liberating readers from the confines of a specific historical moment as the text invites them to recognize larger patterns of injustice inherent in the capitalist system. According to Tim O'Brien, stories (or, more accurately, publicly shared memories) can make "miracles [like this] happen" and can revive what is "absolute and unchanging" (236) about a soul. In publicly-shared memories of an event or person, specific details are left out, rearranged, or even modified, but the purpose of this is to create a "new body" for "souls to inhabit" (239). There is thus a direct link to being alive and to storytelling (or memory-sharing). O'Brien even goes so far to suggest that a writer can save lives—not bodies, but lives—since being dead is like "being inside a book that nobody's reading" (245). Conversely, the very act of being read (and thus

written about) assures that the soul inhabiting its new body (the text) is able to speak its stories, is able to be remembered. Llewellyn's book is a new body that contains and releases the souls lost in the Triangle Fire, but it also provides an antidote to the "aphasia caused by class hegemony over culture" (Zandy, "Fire Poetry" 51), since it is likewise a body that contains and releases the soul of working-class memory.

Chris Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911*, is a trace of the past that contains and re-shapes earlier traces of the past to construct a story about the Triangle Fire, its context, aftermath, and relevance to its audiences. *Fragments* was first printed for circulation a year after it won the Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets in 1986—75 years after the Triangle Fire. Published during the Cold War politics of the 1980s, the book's poetic content and working-class perspective intervene in what Andrew Ross calls "the Reagan and Bush administrations' punitive war on the basic organizing rights of labor" (240). Throughout the 1980s Americans saw a continuation and escalation of policies that advocated and supported shipping garment production overseas where manufacturers could find cheaper labor. In the United States in 1961, for instance, four percent of garments were imported into the country; by 1997, over sixty percent of garments for sale in the United States were manufactured overseas (Borris 212). Manufacturers have received tax breaks in southeast Asian export processing zones since the 1920s, and the Caribbean Basin Initiative of 1983, along with the 1993 passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), gave tax breaks to the wealthiest corporations manufacturing in some of the poorest countries in the world (Borris 212). According to Global Exchange, an economic justice education and action resource center:

Lower tariff rates and the elimination of import quotas make it easier for goods and services to move across borders...NAFTA gave corporations new legal rights to sue national governments for the enactment of policies that can undermine their profits...The changes wrought by NAFTA gave US and Canadian corporations new incentives to relocate factories to Mexico, where wages are lower and labor unions weaker. This contributed to an increase in the number of sweatshops in Mexico. (Global Exchange)

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, then, under both democratic and republican administrations, the United States promoted such “free trade” agreements, which “contributed to the undermining of labor standards and the inhibiting of the right to unionize” (Borris 12), particularly in Mexico, Central American, and Asia.

At the same time, Llewellyn’s publications of *Fragments from the Fire* in the mid-80s and early 90s coincide with the formation and growth of various anti-sweatshop activist groups and the union-organization of immigrant women from East Asia and Central and South America (Featherstone 248): the “discovery...of the El Monte, California ‘slaveshop,’ where seventy-two Thai women bent over machines behind barbed wire producing clothes for Nordstrom, Sears...and other brand[s]” ignited the contemporary anti-sweatshop movement (Borris 213-214). Not without its faults, the contemporary anti-sweatshop movement has employed various strategies and tactics, from promoting fair-trade production and supporting worker organizing drives to drafting legislation to prohibit sweatshop-made merchandise into the United States. Most contemporary grassroots anti-sweatshop activists, though, share with the anti-sweatshop movements in New York City from 1909-1910 an interest in worker-consumer collaboration and solidarity, though across national boundaries, since the “rag trade” industry has indeed been globalized.

In the context of anti-union sentiment and the resurgence of sweatshop rhetoric, reality, and political activism in the United States and abroad, particularly in East Asia,²⁰ Llewellyn juxtaposed photographs from the early twentieth century and incorporated primary historical documents and secondary historical sources to create a record of historical information, a series of poetic traces, a container of memories, and a locus for memory production about the Triangle Fire of March 25, 1911. The following sections explore *Fragments from the Fire*'s engagement with poetic form and historical documents, an engagement that ultimately provides "fragmentary personal and collective experiences...that shape even as they transmit memory" (Hirsch and Smith 225). I argue that the staging of historical traces potentially inspires the formation of a new collective—with a new set of memories—to carry the lessons of the Triangle Fire into a new present and future.²¹ Finally, I consider how Llewellyn's contemporary documentary book is a performance that relies on certain gestures to recall and shape memories. Just as medieval scholars did not adhere to strict divisions between text and experience, art and life, Llewellyn's book demands that *art function as experience*. *Fragments from the Fire* expects its readers to act upon the text *so that* the text can act upon them *and because* the text is acting upon them. The memories created through the reading process prepare active readers to meditate, imagine, move, and create in their own historical moment.

Part 1:

Llewellyn's Engagements with the Past in *Fragments from the Fire*

The Triangle Fire of 1911 was a key, albeit tragic, event in a decades-long struggle by reformists and revolutionaries to improve working conditions in New York City's garment industry, which had, "since the mid-nineteenth century, been associated with the worst of industrialization. Low wages, poor working conditions, disease, overcrowding, and the chaotic nature of fashion production rendered the sweatshop the norm" (Greenwald 79). Throughout the nineteenth century in the United States, garment work had been produced in boardinghouses, small shop floors, workers' homes (known as "homework"), and factories. As Nancy Green explains, "Garments have been made in tenements, lofts, high rises, and suburban homes. Sewing machines have been set up in living rooms, bedrooms, dining rooms, attics, and garages...in what can be called the dispersed assembly line" (43). Regardless of the space of production, though, there have always been common characteristics of "sweatshops," though this term was not officially used until the 1890s.²² As Laura Hapke notes in her seminal study on the idea and reality of the sweatshop, "[b]y the early nineteenth century, the term 'sweating' had become an umbrella for a quota system of subcontracting in which the employer demanded outwork (or home piecework) while operating a centralized place of production, however primitive" (18). The contracting and subcontracting system of labor, combined with the "lowest paid, most degrading American employment" (Hapke 18), characterized the nature of garment work in the United States throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and now twenty-first centuries.

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the "fear that miserable working conditions would radicalize the mass of immigrant workers, coupled with humanitarian impulses [of Progressive Era reformers], combined with worker self-organization" (Greenwald 79), drew national attention. In New York City from 1909-1910, young immigrant garment workers, wealthy women consumers, suffragettes, socialists, and male labor union organizers,

spearheaded by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), mobilized the “Uprising of the 20,000,” the largest women-led strike in American history. This strike was significant on a number of levels: it countered the assumption that women and girls could not organize to resist poor and unsafe working conditions; it united many workers across class, gender, and ethnic lines; and it:

revealed to the public the low pay, harsh supervision, and unsafe conditions that plagued garment workers [which culminated into the winning of] important gains from 300 companies. At Triangle Shirtwaist, one of the biggest shops, women won a 52-hour week and a 12-15 percent wage increase. (Friedheim, et al. 10)

According to historian Richard A. Greenwald, the “Uprising of the 20,000” was a turning point in class consciousness, as it marked a “concerted effort by labor to bring order to chaos in the industry” (79). Significantly, after some of the largest New York City shirtwaist manufacturers moved their work to Philadelphia in 1910 to avoid the demands of the “20,000,” creating what is known in the industry as “runaway shops,” the Philadelphia waistmakers “called their own general strike” in December, “reaffirming the New York strikers’ faith in the union and signaling a new coordinated militancy to management” with solidarity across geographic lines (Greenwald 80). Significantly, membership to the ILGWU grew “from 500...in August to over 20,000 by February” (81).

Despite these significant gains, the largest of the garment manufacturers, including the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, refused to recognize the workers’ union and ignored demands for improved safety conditions. Tragically, a year after the “Uprising of the 20,000,” on March 25, 1911, a fire broke out on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the Asch building—the floors on which the Triangle garment workers manufactured shirtwaists with flammable cloth surrounded

by combustible wicker baskets and machine oil. Many of the 500 garment workers present, mostly Catholic and Jewish women and girls from Russia and Italy, were unable to reach the elevators and stairways. “On the ninth floor,” writes Chris Llewellyn in the note preceding her book of poetry, because of locked doors and inadequate fire escapes, “workers were forced to jump from windows [to avoid suffocation or being burned alive.] One hundred forty-six people, some as young as fourteen, perished” in the Triangle Fire (xvii).

In the face of such unbelievable tragedy, some authority figures, like the Police Commissioner, the members of the Health Department, and the governor, initially refused to take any responsibility for this horrific fire. While the public asked, “Who is to blame for this fire?” authorities placed fault on each other, attempting to shirk responsibility. But in the days following the fire, in the pouring rain, hundreds of thousands of people marched in a public funeral procession with numbered caskets for the bodies that were unidentifiable or still lost at that time.²³ These processions often took on significant political overtones. The public outrage over the unnecessary deaths of these garment workers ignited a mass movement in which ordinary people marched and rallied for workplace fixes, inspiring dramatic social and legislative reforms. They brought safety codes to buildings, mandatory factory inspections, and the abolition of child labor. In addition, following the Triangle Fire, the New York State Legislature created its Factory Investigating Commission, which Frances Perkins—the first female Secretary of Labor and orchestrator of New Deal reforms—referred to as a “‘turning point’ in American attitudes toward social responsibility” (U.S. Department of Labor). Further, “by 1920 the ILGWU claimed more than 100,000 members and was one of the nation’s most powerful industrial unions” (Friedheim, et al. 11). The Triangle Fire, combined with the momentum from

the 1909 and 1910 strikes, ignited a mass social movement that helped strengthen unions, working-class consciousness, and legislative efficacy.

Several histories and inscribed memories of the Fire and its contexts clearly served as source material for Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire*; she includes a list of sources and illustrations, for instance, at the end of edition edition of her book.²⁴ But these materials, as well as Llewellyn's own subject-position as a working-class writer, a "self-described labor poet [who] reveals a loyalty to her garment-worker subjects" in her poetry (Kovacik 152), undoubtedly impacted the ideological framework within which her poetry moves and to which it speaks. Llewellyn's affiliation with garment workers is not imaginary, as she is conscious of her kinship to workers who came before her: her great-grandfather's "bones," which moved through South Dakota's coal mines, she writes, are also her "bones" (Llewellyn, *Steam Dummy* 9). Further, Llewellyn, herself the daughter of the owner of a small dry-cleaning business in rural Ohio, poetically pays tribute to her father and his work in her book, *Steam Dummy*, which Bottom Dog Press published in the same volume as *Fragments from the Fire* in the 1993 edition.

Steam Dummy opens with a reproduced 1934 receipt from Porter's Dry Cleaning and Dye Works, Llewellyn's grandfather's and father's shop; it lists the items cleaned from January 11th - February 22nd of that year: a hat, bathrobe, pair of pants, and a suit were "paid in full" on the 22nd. These garments were worn and professionally cleaned in Ohio in the mid-thirties, which, according to Ohio History Central, saw "more than forty percent of factory workers and sixty-seven percent of construction workers...unemployed" in 1933 ("The Great Depression"). Llewellyn grew up hearing about and witnessing such economic contradictions—some individuals being able to afford professional dry cleaning while others standing in unemployment lines—as she recalls in her poem "Drycleaners" from *Steam Dummy*. She writes that her "father

walk[ed] in clouds / lean[ed] into pillars of steam” as he and the “cloud gang” cleaned “country club tuxes,” as well as “Mrs. Foster’s gold brocade / with real rhinestones,” and the “mayor’s swallowtail [which] blimp[ed] on the steamform” (14). This poem provides an historical sense of Llewellyn’s father’s experience in the dry-cleaning industry during the Depression; however, her knowledge of her father’s experiences as a young man was available to her only through other people’s memories and records. The truth conveyed in “Drycleaners” might be historical fact, but it is most definitely emotional truth and a “representation of the ideological paradigms” that framed her own lived experiences as the daughter of a dry-cleaner, or that were born out of such experiences. The poems in *Steam Dummy* thus prepare readers for the ideological framework within which *Fragments from the Fire* moves. Janet Zandy argues that, “situated at the intersection of class and gender, [Llewellyn’s fire] poetry is intentionally oppositional; there is no phony claim to neutrality or objectivity. [The poems] are not ambiguous; they ask, ‘whose side are you on?’” (Zandy, “Fire Poetry” 46). Progressing through *Fragments from the Fire*, it becomes clear that Llewellyn is most assuredly on the side of the women garment workers who died in the fire.

Llewellyn opens *Fragments* with an “Author’s Note,” the only instance in the text in which Llewellyn writes as an historian who weaves together information in a linear fashion to establish the historical scene that will be imaginatively re-enacted in the pages that follow it. This “Note” is the poetic analogue to the opening frame in many documentary films: often a blank screen with historical information appears, or sometimes flashes of photographs with a “voice of God narrator” briefly relay contextual information. In the case of Llewellyn’s narration, the ideological inflection is clear as it underscores the text’s overall focus on issues of gender, class, and ethnicity. The historical vignette notes that, on March 25, 1911, 146 workers, “nearly

all...female...some as young as fourteen, perished” in one of the greatest disasters of New York City at that time (Llewellyn, *Fragments* xvii). Llewellyn explains that these female garment workers “manufactured blouses for women...on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the Asch Building” (xvii), and when a fire broke out shortly after the workers received their pay, “[n]ot everyone was able to reach the elevators and stairways. On the ninth floor, because the bosses had kept the doors locked to keep out union organizers, workers were forced to jump from windows” (xvii), or they suffocated and burned on the factory floor. She further clarifies that the garment workers at Triangle were primarily Eastern European and Jewish immigrants, “most of whom could not speak the English Language” (xvii). This brief narrative thus highlights the ways in which systems of and people in power oppress individuals who identify with specific subject-positions: as women, as factory workers, and as immigrants. The sub-text of this note suggests that this event was not a time for identity politics to divide the workers who lost their lives in the fire, which reveals the materialist framework within which Llewellyn’s poetic project is working, as well as her notion of the importance of solidarity between workers across religious and ethnic lines. Llewellyn likewise extends this notion of solidarity across time and geographic location when she identifies with the women who worked at Triangle. As Michelle Tokarczyk has suggested in “Toward Imagined Solidarity in the Working-Class Epic: Chris Llewellyn’s *Fragments from the Fire* and Diane Gilliam Fisher’s *Kettle Bottom*”:

Llewellyn does not have any direct connection to the fire victims, nor is she of Italian or Russian-Jewish ancestry—the two ethnic groups most represented among the factory workforce...Llewellyn, never a factory worker, is claiming the tragedy of the Triangle Factory victims as a national tragedy, affiliating with them as workers and as women. (877-878)²⁵

The “Author’s Note” and the poems that follow clearly position Llewellyn on the side of the workers, and the photo-poetic project as a whole is a testament to their lives and what their deaths mean for garment workers—and the entire working-class—today.

Llewellyn’s expressions of solidarity with the Triangle workers is perhaps most salient in the book’s opening poem, “The Great Divide,” in which she establishes both a context for understanding the fire and her affiliation with the garment workers’ experiences as women. In a series of four quatrains separated by single lines that allude to temporal shifts, “The Great Divide” likewise highlights the dominant class position, religion, and ethnicity of many of the Triangle workers. The first stanza establishes a sense of place, just as Llewellyn’s “Author’s Note” does: we are on “Henry Street, Cherry Street, Hester Street” (*Fragments* 5), the ghetto of New York City’s lower east side. Characteristic of Llewellyn textual performance, she does not articulate an historical narrative of the poverty of the ghetto, as is done in earlier documentary books, including Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*. Instead, Llewellyn forms poetic lines that function as traces of the past, as inscriptions that contain memories of class-position. The patriarchs of the garment workers’ homes, for instance, are “standing beside a hundred rag-stuffed windows” (5). This line’s final three sequentially-stressed syllables—rág-stúffed wíndows—highlight the families’ poverty, suggesting they keep the cold from entering their homes by filling the gaps in their windows with old cloth. But while the fathers remain home to honor Shabbat as they “[c]hant the Havdallah” and “praise the Almighty for creating...a Sabbath / that cuts one day away from the fabric of the week” (5), young women and girls, “bent over Singers...stitch into sunset” (5). While poverty affects the entire family, the women and girls are doubly impacted, as they are not permitted to participate in the ceremonial prayers at sunset as they “piecework shirtwaists” with “their backs to factory windows” (5).

Llewellyn thus indicts the patriarchal traditions within which garment workers were living and working, which then allows garment workers themselves to speak against their working conditions. As Kovacik implies, “The Great Divide” does not present an entirely favorable picture of the patriarchs at home. Llewellyn refers to the men as “father-singers” (5), in part because of the ceremonial chants they sing to welcome in their day of rest. But their rest happens at the same time that their wives and daughters are “bent over Singer” sewing machines, thus suggesting that the relative luxury experienced by the men is, at least in part, complicit in the oppression experienced by the women at work. The poem’s final quatrain further ironizes this image when the “fathers pour / the ritual wine into a little platter. / Each strikes a sulphur-tip match, touches / the surface of the small wine lake” (5), which “quiet[ly] foreshadow...the impending factory fire” (Kovacik 143) that was likely sparked by a match-lit cigarette. These images are not meant to function mimetically; they do not necessarily represent an historical moment. Rather, they are ideological markers, delicately indicting the patriarchs who, possibly unknowingly, heeded Old World traditions and rituals at the expense of their daughters who labored in unsafe factories. Moreover, by poetically re-imagining garment workers and Jewish rituals, Llewellyn alludes to earlier images initially transmitted by participant-observers in the shops. For instance, Llewellyn’s description of the garment workers as “[b]ent over Singers...stitch[ing] into sunset” calls to mind the 1909 testimony of Clara Lemlich, the garment worker who sparked the general strike that led to the “Uprising of the 20,000”:

The regular work pays about \$6 a week and the girls have to be at their machines at 7 o’clock in the morning and they stay at them until 8 o’clock at night, with just one-half hour for lunch in that time...there is just one row of machines that the daylight ever gets to - that is the front row, nearest the window. The girls at all the other rows of machines

back in the shops have to work by gaslight, by day as well as by night. Oh, yes, the shops keep the work going at night, too. (Lemlich 66)

Llewellyn's poetic lines are thus the "technologies of memory" that transmit recollections of the past into a new time and space; they are also inscribed containers of memory, as they hold within them other women's testimony of their lived experiences.

Yet another example of Llewellyn's appropriation and revision of historical information occurs in the third quatrain, which recalls a sign that has since become emblematic of the tension between workers and bosses: "If you don't show up on Saturday or Sunday, / you've already been fired when it's Monday" (5). Karen Kovacik notes that these lines allude to a former Triangle worker and labor pioneer, Pauline Newman, who "reminisce[ed] about the elevator sign regarding Sunday and Monday work, although Llewellyn alters the notice to include Saturday in the prohibition, thereby making it pertain to Jews and Christians alike" (142-143). The letters of the sign are, after all, "set in English, Hebrew, and Italian" (Llewellyn, *Fragments* 5). Kovacik's insightful analysis of Llewellyn's alteration to the elevator sign gestures back to the "Author's Note," which suggests a solidarity between "garment girls" of different ethnicities and religions because of their class-position and labor. Too, Llewellyn prefaces "The Great Divide" with an excerpt from Isaiah, though other sections of the book are introduced with biblical passages from the New Testament. Michelle Tokarczyk rightly suggests that Llewellyn's "inclusion of epigraphs from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament...links the religious beliefs of the Italian and Jewish fire victims and emphasizes their commonalities" (872), thereby revealing the workers' solidarity with each other across religious and ethnic lines.

A later poem in her volume, "Potter's Field," extends Llewellyn's textual acts of solidarity beyond these garment workers and toward Thomas Horton, one of the Black porters who was

employed at Triangle and who helped operate the elevators during the fire. Thus, while *Fragments* rarely considers the disenfranchisement of Black workers throughout her book—in fact, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union was not open to Black garment workers until the 1930s—Llewellyn’s poem “Potter’s Field” does function as a poetic trace of such disenfranchisement. This poem employs a textual solidarity that gives voice to a marginalized worker, and it further inscribes a memory of Horton in our collective working-class consciousness, thereby expanding Llewellyn’s own engagement with the past in *Fragment from the Fire*.

Michelle Tokarczyk argues that “Potter’s Field” depicts the “downplaying” and “erasure” of the prejudice that Black Americans experienced in the North during the early twentieth century; in this way, according to Tokarczyk, Llewellyn expresses solidarity with Black workers (875). While her interpretative frame is valid and valuable, Tokarczyk’s reading of the poem fails to consider the crucial climax and resolution of the second stanza. Further, her reading relies upon misinformation that is embedded within “Potter’s Field” in both the first and second editions of *Fragments*, misinformation that was not corrected until the 2016 edition. Tokarczyk notes:

Thomas Horton, an elevator operator, was the only African American to testify at the trial of the Triangle bosses. Yet he was referred to in newspaper accounts only as “Heroic Elevator Man,” never named. At first glance, it might seem that this poem is Horton’s chance to voice his identity and his story. However, a close reading suggests that his voice is again squelched. Horton states that the potter’s field was transformed into Washington Square Park when the upper class moved in and bitterly remarks that President Washington once sold a slave for a bale of cotton. Then, he cuts off his narrative, “... But you want to hear about the fire.” (875)

Tokarczyk's argument is that Horton's voice is "downplayed" since he is prevented from speaking about how "the potter's field was transformed into Washington Square Park when the upper class moved in." Based on Tokarczyk's reading, we can imagine an invisible interviewer insisting that Horton comment about the Triangle Fire instead of the potter's field, which, according to Tokarczyk, leaves readers "left to reflect upon his absent voice and his imperative to tell the story that [the interviewer and readers] want to hear" (875).

While I appreciate Tokarczyk's focus on "Potter's Field" and her discussion of the erasure of Black voices from American working-class history, her lack of focus on the second stanza impacts her interpretation of the poem. First, and significantly, the scene within the opening stanza of "Potter's Field" is *imagined*: Llewellyn has certainly researched the history of Washington Square Park (indeed, it really was built atop a potter's field); however, Horton never spoke the words in the first stanza. In fact, historians and genealogists know little about Thomas Horton. His name appears in the official trial transcripts (Horton did testify that he worked as a porter at Triangle), and he is quoted in a *McClure's Magazine* article from September 1911. Beyond these two primary sources, Thomas Horton's story remains elusive, and in fact, was nearly absent from our working-class consciousness until Llewellyn's poem gave textual space for him to speak. "Potter's Field" itself is not an example of the downplaying or erasure of Black working class voices; rather, "Potter's Field" encodes the fact that popular media outlets did not transmit the stories and voices of the Black porters in their reporting of the Triangle Fire in 1911. We must analyze the second section of "Potter's Field" to fully appreciate Llewellyn's hermeneutics of remembrance that she adopts when she shares Horton's story.

This second verse inscribes the chaos and confusion among the garment workers and elevator engineers when the fire broke out. Llewellyn stages quotations from the *McClure's* article,

noting that Horton and two elevator engineers—Italian immigrants Gaspar Mortillalo and Giuseppe “Joe” Zito—“ran those cars till they / couldn’t run no more... Circuit breakers were blowing out all over the place. / The ladies were jumping on the ropes—why there were twenty on the roof!” (Llewellyn, *Fragments* 43). The *Transcripts of Criminal Trial Against Triangle Owners* likewise confirm that Thomas Horton was “downstairs with the engineer” during the time of the Fire (1338-1339). However, the trial transcripts give no account of what Horton was doing “downstairs with the engineer”; as such, his voice and presumed importance to the story of the fire were downplayed during the trial. But in Llewellyn’s poem, guided by the 1911 *McClure’s* article, his voice comes alive again. According to the article and Llewellyn’s sampling of it, we understand that Horton worked heroically under horrific circumstances when he helped run “those cars till they / couldn’t run no more” (Llewellyn, *Fragments* 43).

Despite Horton’s efforts, the final lines of the poem reveal that the “headlines named Giuseppe [not Horton] / ‘Heroic Elevator Man’” (Llewellyn, *Fragments* 43).²⁶ As multiple accounts from 1911 report, Zito performed admirably and suffered permanent health conditions due to his rescue efforts amid the “choking smoke” (Llewellyn, *Fragments* 43).²⁷ Indeed, stories describing Zito’s heroism flooded the papers, though with little mention of the support from Gaspar Mortillalo and no immediate mention of the work of Thomas Horton, one of the Black porters employed at Triangle at the time who possibly had engineer experience to operate the elevators. Thus, Tokarczyk is correct when she claims that “the harshness of the prejudice that African Americans experienced... was downplayed or erased” at the turn of the century (875); however, the locus of this erasure is misplaced in her reading. Tokarczyk suggests that the imagined interviewer prevents Horton from telling the story he wants to tell; however, in this imagined sequence of the poem, Horton speaks about *exactly* what he wants to speak about:

gentrification, slave-owning founding fathers, and the dishonoring of the dead. Further, he builds toward his own account of the fire. After he reflects upon “the homeless bones / [that] were pushing up a monument to President Washington” (Llewellyn, *Fragments* 43), Horton offers a brief history lesson, explaining: “Then the factories came and company housing...Crowded! You don’t know / the word!” (43). Thus, neither the imagined interviewer nor the poem’s readers are downplaying his story. Instead, Horton ensures that his historical analysis of Washington Square Park *and* his experience during the Triangle Fire will be heard (or, rather, Llewellyn’s text makes sure they will be heard).

Importantly, the final lines of “Potter’s Field” imbue Horton with pride over his testimony:

...Here I’d like to state
some of us porters—all Negroes—testified
at the trial. The headlines named Giuseppe
“Heroic Elevator Man.” (43)

In these lines Llewellyn imagines Horton proudly asserting that he testified at the trial just before he flatly states that “The headlines named Giuseppe / ‘Heroic Elevator Man.’” Horton’s emotions in the last sentence of the poem are ambiguous, though Llewellyn’s phrasing and line breaks suggest that the erasure from our memory of Horton’s role in the rescue of the Triangle workers is due to the media and their “headlines.” Llewellyn’s poem thus subtly indicts the media for its repeated focus on the heroism of an Italian immigrant engineer, rather than that of a Black porter. Still, at the level of the text, we can claim that Horton feels pride for the work that Giuseppe accomplished; that is, through her remixing of the *McClure*’s article, Llewellyn imagines Horton revealing his solidarity with the Italian immigrant elevator engineers just as they, together, demonstrated solidarity with the garment workers. The opening epigraph of the

poem reads: “*Thomas Horton speaks:*” and the poem concludes with the line: “Heroic Elevator Man.” Thus, at the level of the text, Horton, too, refers to Giuseppe as a hero, but we trust Horton’s assertion more than that of the headlines since Horton toiled with Zito on the day of the fire. In addition, Llewellyn’s opening epigraph and final line, when considered together, also seem to assert that Thomas Horton, too, is a “Heroic Elevator Man.” Not only does Llewellyn give space for Horton to speak his story of solidarity with the garment workers who were desperately trying to escape the flames, and not only does she imagine Horton expressing solidarity with Giuseppe Zito; Llewellyn also reveals that Thomas Horton’s name has been lost from the annals of history. However, within “Potter’s Field,” she reinscribes his name, creates space for him to speak, and affords him the title “Heroic Elevator Man” that he also most assuredly deserves. In doing so, both Llewellyn and the text expresses solidarity with Thomas Horton.

The staging of these memories within the “Author’s Note,” “The Great Divide,” and “Potter’s Field” constitutes an ideological act as well as an historical account. Llewellyn’s poetic process calls to mind Pierre Nora’s description of how memory, and the inscription of it, works: it “only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic” (Nora 8). Llewellyn’s images in her opening note and in these two poems, which draw from other documents, focus on specific traces of history that operate in real and symbolic realms to prepare us for her ideologically inflected stance on the Triangle Fire, a stance marked by affiliative, working-class, and textual solidarity.

Part 2:

Memory and Working-Class Consciousness in Llewellyn's "March 25, 1911"

That said, “March 25, 1911,” the longest poem within Llewellyn’s book, is perhaps the closest Llewellyn comes in a single poem to constructing a linear narrative, though she does so without interjecting an authoritative narrative voice. Paraphrasing or directly copying from previously published historical records and books, Llewellyn loosely weaves a story as she sifts through “fragments from the fire.” But this poem is not merely “an accumulation of data...Nor is it nostalgia, a sweetening of reflection, an easy sell” (Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 3). Janet Zandy refers to the kind of work being done in Llewellyn’s book, and I would suggest this poem specifically, as “liberating memories,” which “involves the reconstruction of a set of relationships, not the exactitude of specific events” (3). Beginning with the title and an epigraph-like stanza whose line’s grammatical units are repeated at the conclusion of each of the poem’s stanzas, Llewellyn establishes a sense of place and time before she poetically reconstructs a scene from the fire, reminiscent of early documentary books, including Gardner’s *Photographic Sketch Book*, Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, and the FSA projects of the 1930s. Llewellyn’s opening lines read:

March 25, 1911

It was Spring. It was Saturday.
Payday. For some it was Sabbath.
Soon it will be Easter. It was
approaching April, nearing Passover.
It was close to closing time. (6)

While the title and lines focus primarily on historical, seasonal, and “religious time-markers” (Kovacik 143)—the date and references to spring and the approaching Jewish and Christian holy days of the week and year—the final line indicates place: we are clearly at work, nearing the day’s end. Nearly every metrical foot alludes to a time of joyful new beginnings: the day of rest, holidays, spring flowers, payday, and the end of the work shift.

However, just as Llewellyn's imagery in "The Great Divide" does not only serve as historical referent, these opening lines convey more than spatio-temporal information. This opening stanza, when considered alongside the following stanzas, highlights the tragic irony of the Triangle Fire, when workers actually did fall or burn to their deaths at the close of work, just after they received their pay. The meaning of the final line, then, is doubly significant when we consider such irony, as the close of this particular workday would mean the end of 146 garment workers' lives. This irony must have been apparent to the families of the men, women, and children who perished in the fire, but rather than writing a history of such sadness, Llewellyn, a trained poet, transmits the memory of the emotional significance the event. As with a camera, Llewellyn widens her aperture to focus closely on specific images to contain the memory of and replicate the emotional truth of witnessing the fire. Even more significant, though, is that the memory of such emotion is shared by working people and their families across time and space. This delicate stanza, then, potentially accesses the collective memory of nearly any individual who reads this poem. After all, collective memories are not interested in the presentation of fact after fact; instead, they are interested in the exposition and construction of relationships between people, events, and ideas, as well as in an emotional truth that has been and will be experienced and felt by a particular group of people. As Pierre Nora has suggested, building from Maurice Halbwachs's study of history and collective memory, while "history is a representation of the past...[m]emory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present" (Nora 8). Collective memories thus often "recall pain and oppression...as well as defeat and despair" (Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 4), the emotional truth of lived experiences of a working-class collective, regardless of historical time and physical geography.

The first few stanzas that follow the opening lines of “March 25, 1911” construct a fictional narrative of the last few minutes before the fire broke out on the eighth floor of the Asch Building. As in Llewellyn’s poem “Drycleaners,” this poem contrasts the experiences of privileged and working people: while the “ladies / stroll in shirtwaists” below the Asch Building on a leisurely Saturday afternoon (6), garment girls “still smell[ing] of machine oil...piecework facing each other” (6). As in other sweatshop poems and historical accounts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Llewellyn’s poetic narrative recalls the pace of the garment work, again contrasting the experiences of the women strolling through Washington Square Park and those quickly working in the factory. Likening the piecework and the cloth’s movement to the Tarantella, a highly stylized and fast-paced Italian dance, Llewellyn writes:

That machine heads connecting the belts
to the flywheel to rotating axle
sing the Tarantella. Faster,
faster vibrate the needles, humming
faster the fashionable dance. (7)

The line breaks in these final three lines stress the first syllable of the word “faster,” which is repeated throughout the stanza, thereby speeding up the poetic line to emphasize the “race of the needle’s pace” (49) as the garment workers try to meet their quotas before the close of the workday. Indeed, images of fast-paced garment production are echoed throughout the book: “Marie,” the speaker of “Dear Uncle Stanislaus,” a letter purported to have been written just a few days before the Triangle Fire, writes that there is “[s]uch noise in this nation! All hours people shout. / Always factory bells and whistles. Up in the loft the / clatter of cloth in machines” (18). Similarly, the poem “Cutter and Mother” recalls “[m]achines scream[ing] / for more cloth, faster, more cloth” (19). And former garment worker Sonya Levien’s testimony is embedded in the poem “White Light.” She writes, “First English sentence: / ‘Watch your

needle—three thousand stitches / A minute.’ Say, I was some swift kid / in those days: seventy-two hundred / an hour, eighty-six thousand pieces / A day, four dollars in the pay envelope” (40). Llewellyn likewise incorporates Clara Lemlich’s testimony into “Survivor’s Cento” to highlight the child labor abuses in this fast-paced garment industry: “Ninth floor looked like a kindergarten. We were eight, / nine, ten. If the Inspector came, they hid us in bins” (33).

Although these lines, often excerpted from documents published in the early- and mid-twentieth century, certainly recall historical information about working conditions in sweatshops, their function is more rhetorical than historical. The lines from “March 25, 1911,” for instance, subtly expose and indict Triangle owners Max Blanck and Isaac Harris for rejecting their employees’ demands for safety provisions just a year earlier. Surrounded by cloth, oil, flammable wicker baskets, locked exit doors, and inadequate fire escapes, Triangle was, indeed, a fire trap. Karen Kovacik suggests that the “religious time-markers, imagery, and language suggest that in not providing adequate fire protection, the profit-hungry industrialists had committed a desecration” (143). Significantly, Triangle owners and Joseph Asch, the building owner, knew that their building failed to meet safety standards. The 135-foot high building was made with “wooden trim, wooden window frames, and wooden floors” (Stein 23), which, though combustible materials, were legal because the overall structure was 15 feet short of the law requiring metal trim and window frames and concrete flooring. The building was also short one exit staircase because architect Julius Franke petitioned for an exception, claiming that the building’s fire escape “practically makes three staircases” (Stein 23), even though the fire escape ended on the second floor of the building. Of the two staircases, only one of them had an exit to the roof, the other ending on the tenth floor. And the doors did not comply with Section 80 of the State Labor Law, which “required that all factory doors ‘shall be constructed as to open

outwardly, where practicable, and shall not be locked, bolted or fastened during work hours” (Stein 23-24). All of the shop doors at Triangle, however, opened inward, since the “last step at each landing was only one stair’s width away from the door” (Stein 24). These factors alone suggest that the Triangle Fire was a disaster in the making, but P.J. McKeon, Columbia University expert on fire protection, noted after a 1909 inspection of Triangle that “[h]e was concerned immediately with the crowding of so many people into the top three floors of the building,” and he expressed concern over the lack of fire drills in the factory, since “without previous instruction on how to handle themselves in such an emergency a fire would panic the girls” (Stein 26). McKeon also found that the “door to the Washington Place stairway was ‘usually kept locked...to keep track of so many girls’” (Stein 26), and he subsequently recommended that New York City fire prevention expert H.F.J. Porter set up fire drills in the Triangle Factory, but his request to meet with Triangle owners about the drills was ignored. Thus, when the fire broke out on the eighth floor of Triangle in 1911, the garment workers could not escape the “shrapnel of needles and screws” or the “screaming novenas of flame” (Llewellyn 8).

Moreover, the lines from “Dear Uncle Stanislaus,” “Cutter and Mother,” and “White Light,” which expose poor, unsafe working conditions, also reveal the contradictions between the promises offered to immigrant workers at the turn of the twentieth century and the realities that they faced in the garment industry. “Marie,” for instance, admonishes her uncle, “[D]o not believe gold lies in the street. / This is no golden land...Next to Triangle Waist is a park with flowers and birds. But who has time to enjoy? Who will pay for that?” (18). And the young shirtwaist cutter in “Cutter and Mother” asks her mother to reconsider the logic that a sweatshop factory job is better than the alternatives, such as being “squeezed / inside a wire cage” to work

in the coal mines (19). The speaker understands that her mother is “proud none of her sons spend / Daylight crawling into darkness. / Not harnessed and roped like pit / ponies” (19), but still pleads:

...Mother what about

Parts deep inside me, what you can't
see with your eyes. For twelve hours
not a soft word spoken...

...Mother even the pit pony
that is beaten gets a sweet to eat
pat on the head once in a while. (19)

The speaker of “White Light,” constructed from Sonya Levien’s testimony, remembers her dreams as a young girl in Russia: to live in the “Golden Land” and to “work at Life and Love. / Be what you call a builder of bridges. Yes, [to] go back, show all Moscow / a great American lady” and “earn wages [to] save [her] sister’s passage” to the United States (40). But, as the speaker recounts:

...Soon like the rest

I grieved at my machine, swore I'd
marry any old man just to get out.
One by one the others left to marry

But returned to the shop. In them
I saw my future in a white heat light
no dreams could soften. (40)

Recognition of these contradictions—between expectations and lived experiences—is a significant aspect of working-class consciousness. While some historians claim that the social movements leading up to and following the fire were rooted primarily in anarchist and socialist ideologies from Eastern Europe, others, like Marxist historians Paul D’Amato and Joel Woller, suggest that what workers expected, needed, and deserved often contradicted with what they

received, which is the most powerful radicalizing and educational force in building working-class consciousness and a strong labor movement. Llewellyn's juxtaposition of workers' realities and dreams exposes these contradictions for the readers, rhetorically inviting them to recognize the contradictions in their own lived experiences in the late twentieth, early twenty-first centuries so they may stand in solidarity with the workers whose own contradictory experiences are inscribed in the poetry.

Moreover, Llewellyn's documentary poetics of relationality mirrors the formation of a collective consciousness that is required to effect change: Llewellyn draws from "varied sources to provide multiple views of the tragedy" and of sweatshop working conditions in general (Kovacik 143). Her polyvocal text suggests that individuals must be conscious of the contradictory experiences under capitalism *and* that these voices must be in conversation with each other to form a collective. For Llewellyn, the individual documentary poems and entire text of *Fragments from the Fire* reflect the formation of such a collective. Llewellyn's aesthetic practice echoes the 1938 essay, "Realism in the Balance," in which Marxist György Lukács argues that socially conscious literature cannot, in form or content, simply reflect the tragic working conditions and alienation experienced under capitalism. Lukács claims that, "[i]f literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface" (1037). Part of his argument rests upon his critique of literary modernism's tendency, in his opinion, to favor subjective experiences of its characters (alienated from themselves, their families, their work, etc.) without illustrating the reality as a whole—that workers are *actually* more connected to each other than they ever have been. Llewellyn's poetic form, her staging of documents and

voices next to each other, suggests that individual, subjective experiences are worth remembering, but also that these experiences and memories should be in conversation with each other, as this conversation is a first step in forming a collective. Llewellyn's documentary poetics thus "grasp[s] reality as it truly is": devastating working conditions are highlighted in the poetry, yes, but so is the potential for changing these conditions.

Although Llewellyn's documentary practice reproduces multiple testimonies of people who worked in sweatshops and who survived the Triangle Fire, the shifting verb tense throughout "March 25, 1911" suggests that, while the event of the fire was experienced and witnessed by a specific group one hundred years ago, the event is still part of the past, present, and future of working-class collective memory, which is itself a "perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present" (Nora 8). Llewellyn signals her awareness of the distinction between history (in the past) and memory (ever-present) in the opening lines of "March 25, 1911," which provide short bursts of historically-grounding information: "It *was* Spring...For some it *was* Sabbath. / Soon it *will be* Easter" (6, emphasis added). The following stanza, which begins the narrative thread of the poem, contains no verbs at all, as if to suggest that, while the scene takes place in late spring, it could be a description of something that happened anytime in the past, that could be happening now, or that could happen anytime in the future. These opening snapshots—"The sun a hot flywheel spinning / the earth's axle" (6)—are not solely about technique, crisp images, or seasonal markings; instead, they suggest that the historical event of the fire is remembered every time "[t]he heads of trees [are] budding / in Washington Square Park" (6).

Even more tragically, though, the lines, devoid of verbs and thus verb tenses, suggest that garment fires like the one at Triangle still occur. Indeed, just three months before the centennial of the Triangle Fire, a fire destroyed a garment factory near Dhaka, Bangladesh, killing nearly

two dozen workers. The details of this fire are eerily similar to Triangle's: the fire largely took place on the ninth floor of the building, workers were surrounded by highly combustible materials with inadequate exits, and many workers jumped from the building to avoid being burned alive (Manik and Bajaj).²⁸ Llewellyn's poetic experimentation with parts of speech reflects her awareness of the rise of the new sweatshop (in the U.S. and abroad) when she first published in the 1980s, and it anticipates the deplorable working conditions and deaths that we still witness in the twenty-first century. Llewellyn's documentary praxis, which engages past, present, and future, suggests a textual solidarity with garment workers across time and geographic location; her praxis is thus characterized by internationalism, a "vision of community, not based on race, gender, or nationality, but on treating workers or colonized peoples abroad—regardless of their ethnicity or citizenship—as engaged in the same freedom struggles over economic and political self-determination" (Rana). Key to Llewellyn's documentary praxis, then, is her apparent, albeit subtle, internationalist textual solidarity.

Further, the narrative stanzas immediately following stanza two of "Llewellyn's March 25, 1911" oscillate between present tense and present progressive: "Rosie Glantz is singing 'Every Little / Movement Has a Meaning All Its Own'" just before "Sophie and Della and dozens of others / jump on machine tables" to avoid the flames around them (6; 7). To complicate matters, Llewellyn includes first-hand reportage from the fire, though the witnesses are afforded different verb tenses. As if Llewellyn herself has interviewed café owner Lena Goldman, she writes:

"I could see them falling,"
said Lena Goldman. "I was sweeping out
in front of my cafe. At first some thought
it was bolts of cloth—till they opened
with legs! I still see the day
it rained children. Yes,
It was nearly Passover." (8; emphasis added)

But, “Ordering the nets and ladders, Battalion / Chief Worth *explains*, ““I didn’t know they would come down three and even four / together”” (9; emphasis added). And Llewellyn notes that “Reporter Bill Shepherd *is writing*” (8; emphasis added), as if to suggest that the combined testimony of each of these witnesses—Goldman, Worth, and Shepherd—is part of an eternal present, a collective memory of the event of the fire that transcends and lives longer than any historical account of the fire.

To complicate her poetic trace, or perhaps to clarify it, Llewellyn creates a fictional sequence within the poem’s main narrative in which two garment workers, Sophie Salemi and Della Costello, stand on a window ledge, preparing to jump together to avoid the burning shop.²⁹ Their actions are always written in the present tense: they “stand on windowsill, / look out on crazy quilt of town” (8), but their voices/thoughts, designated by the italicized stanzas toward the end of the poem, initially convey information that will happen in the future. As if prophesying their funeral, from their sill they can imagine “[p]iling red roses / two white hearses pull up / Cherry Street and the Children / of Mary Society march / in banners of prayers” (9). They further imagine their “*schoolmates*,” which signals the young age of the garment girls, singing in prayer at the mass funeral. But this prayer combines lines from several prayers, as well as Sophie and Della’s own words:

*O Trinity of Blessed Light
Our Lady of Perpetual Help
Ave Maria, Ave Maria
Now and at the Hour
of the Tarantella. (9)*

Readers with basic knowledge of Catholic worship likely expect the final lines to read, “Now and at the hour of our death”; Llewellyn capitalizes on this knowledge to equate “death” with the “Tarantella,” the Italian dance that makes use of fine garments and fast-paced, frenzied bodily

movements. Sophie and Della, as well as their “schoolmates” who will participate in the politicized funeral procession in the following days, understand that the pace of production of fine garments is the source of their death. Put simply: garment work (and those who controlled the conditions of this work) are responsible for the deaths of Sophie, Della, and all 146 shirtwaist makers. This assertion is highlighted again several stanzas later when Llewellyn imagines Sophie and Della on the windowsill, thinking, “*Intertwined comets we will stream / the nightmares of Owners / Joseph Asch / Max Blanck / Isaac Harris*” (10). Llewellyn suggests that the image and reality of girls falling afire—“*intertwined comets*”—will, and should, forever haunt the owners. These few lines allude to another Fire poem, which was written by the “poet laureate of the slum and sweatshop” and published in the *Jewish Daily Forward* in the days following the tragedy.

Morris Rosenfeld concluded his poem with a similar haunting of the owners:

Let the burning building, our daughters in flame
Be the nightmare that destroys your sleep,
The poison that embitters your lives,
The horror that kills your joy.
And in the midst of celebrations for your children,
May you be struck blind with fear over the
Memory of this red avalanche
Until time erases you. (qtd. in Stein 145-146)

Clearly alluding to these final lines of Rosenfeld’s poem, “March 25, 1911” captures not only the despair but the anger felt by the general public following the fire; further, she allows Sophie and Della to speak from the dead, and on behalf of all those who died in the Triangle Fire.

Moreover, the present progressive of the girls’ concluding benediction in “March 25, 1911” is indeterminate, as Sophie and Della seem to be in the process of falling from the ninth floor at the conclusion of the poem. They pray:

*The Lord is my Shepherd
green pastures still
waters anointest heads*

*with oil overflowing
preparest a table—now
our arms around each other
we thread the needle where
no rich man can go spinning
the earth's axle we are
leaving in light* (10)

The girls, arms “around each other...*are leaving in light*,” suggesting that their jump to avoid the burning factory is ever present; in fact, in the third edition of *Fragments*, Llewellyn eliminated the period that punctuates the final stanza of “March 25, 1911.” Within the frame of this poem, then, Sophie and Della never fall to the sidewalk; there is no end-stop as signaled by the period. Rather, the women, and the memory of them, will always *be*. Sophie and Della thus become “iconic figures” (Kovacik 144) who represent all the women who died in the Triangle Fire and all garment workers who will continue to die in apparel production disasters in the future. Too, the final lines also suggest that the workers will enter eternity together. As Karen Kovacik has argued:

Unlike their profiteering owners, Sophie and Della can pass easily through the eye of the needle into the Kingdom of Heaven. With this twisted collage of prayers, Llewellyn invokes the traditional Christian comfort of heavenly reward for the weary and lowly of this world while still issuing a protest against [the] ‘Bosses of Locked / Doors of Sweetheart Contracts.’” (146)

The girls are “leaving in light,” a terrifying image of girls literally aflame, but their consciences are also “light,” for they do not share the burdens of Triangle owners and will thus be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

The repeated use of quotation marks in “March 25, 1911,” as well as the poem’s placement next to a photograph (in the third edition) and biblical excerpts (in each edition), calls attention

to Llewellyn's use of multiple historical documents to construct her book. The book overall, and this poem in particular, thus implicitly asks its readers to question how a narrative is told and what is left out of or highlighted in a particular story. Llewellyn understands that all language is politically fraught and has ideological inflections, so it is notable that she does not include a widely reproduced narrative about the Triangle Fire in any of her fire poems. United Press reporter Bill Shepherd's "eye-witness account" of the fire was first published in the *Milwaukee Journal* on March 27, 1911; in this account Shepherd records a "love affair" he viewed on the window ledge of the eighth or ninth floor of the Asch Building when a man "helped" women to the window sill and "dropped" them from the building, noting that the women "were as unresisting as if [the man] were helping them onto a streetcar instead of into eternity. Undoubtedly he saw that a terrible death awaited them in the flames, and his was only a terrible chivalry" (Shepherd 192). According to Shepherd's account, before the male garment worker "helps" the last woman from the ledge, they passionately embrace and kiss. He "drops" her, and then jumps after her, also to his death.

Llewellyn refuses to repeat this narrative in her poem not because of any qualms about the story's historical accuracy, but because its repetition etches this narrative into a working-class collective memory, and Llewellyn would likely suggest that this particular memory of the fire renders the "factory girls" as mere victims who needed the assistance of a man to jump from a burning building. While Llewellyn certainly relies on pathetic appeal, much like Shepherd's account, to highlight the greed that led to the suffering caused by the great fire, she does not want to present the garment workers as passive victims. Thus, in "March 25, 1911," she still stages a passage from Shepherd's original account of the fire, though her selected passage indicates, via Shepherd, "I remember the great strike of last year, / these same girls demanding decent /

working conditions” (Llewellyn, *Fragments* 8), which is a revision of Shepherd’s printed words from 1911: “I looked upon the heap of dead bodies and I remembered these girls were the shirtwaist makers. I remembered their great strike of last year in which these same girls had demanded more sanitary conditions and more safety precautions in the shops” (Shepherd). The “great strike” to which Shepherd alludes is the “Uprising of the 20,000.” As a result of this great “uprising,” Triangle strikers “won a 52-hour week and a 12-15 percent wage increase. But Triangle and other large companies rejected workers’ safety demands and refused to recognize the union” (Friedheim 11). Shepherd’s reminder of this strike—and Llewellyn’s inclusion of this reminder— informs how readers of Llewellyn’s poem will remember the garment girls. They are not mere victims but are agents who will stop at nothing for a union with their comrades, even a union in a death embrace. The inclusion of Shepherd’s comment about the “Uprising of the 20,000” likewise affects how readers approach the final lines of the poem. The present progressive tense of this final allusion to union in death (they “are leaving in light”) is a call for readers to continue the work of the strikers before and after the Triangle Fire. It further suggests that the working class, especially garment workers, is in a state of permanent revolution and is destined for greatness because they are “in light.” Sophie and Della are thereby stitched into working-class memory as icons—part idealized, part hauntingly grounded in reality—who perpetually struggle for union and for the love of their true “sweethearts,” their garment worker sisters.³⁰

Part 3:

Image, Text, and Experience in *Fragments*

The days following the Triangle Fire saw collective mourning, outrage in the news media, and large-scale political protest. The question, “Who is to blame for this tragedy?” was asked by families, citizens, and public officials, and as Leon Stein, former editor of *Justice* (the official publication of the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union), wrote in his unmatched account of the fire: “Politicians and bureau officials, anticipating public wrath, searched for the language and logic with which to justify themselves and escape blame” for the fire and extensive loss of life (Stein 113). Multiple investigations were launched to determine who was responsible, and the “*Tribune* began to carry on its front page a standing box on the fire” to update readers, and to respond to public outcry over the deaths (113-114). Not surprisingly, though, “with the same unanimity, all [officials] denied fault or departmental responsibility” (114). Still, public outrage over the deaths of the 146 workers led to a mass, public funeral on April 5, 1911, with 100,000 people marching in silent procession through relentless rain past 300,000 mourners. Llewellyn’s poems “I am Appalled,” “Funeral for the Nameless,” and “Jury of Peers” serve as poetic traces of the mourning and protest in the months following the fire. Through anaphoric expressions, imagist-like snapshots, textual “voice-overs,” and photo-poetic interaction, these three poems collectively capture the anger and mourning felt by a clear majority of New Yorkers in 1911; they further inspire such emotions in contemporary readers who are engaged in the process of critical, active reading.

Leon Stein highlights the cyclical nature of public officials’ bickering and shirking of responsibility in his nonfiction novel, *The Triangle Fire*, which, as noted in the back of each edition of Llewellyn’s *Fragments from the Fire*, served as source material for her poems. In her list of sources, we also see that Llewellyn examined the Library of Congress’s collection of images from the Triangle Fire—images that likewise served as primary source material for

Stein's nonfiction novel. Llewellyn's brief, fourteen-line poem, "I am Appalled," both drawing from and responding to the front page of the March 28, 1911 *New York Evening Journal* and pages 114-115 of Stein's *The Triangle Fire*, captures the sentiment and question that dominated newspaper copy in the days following the Triangle Fire.

The title of Llewellyn's poem is, unlike her other poems, set off in quotation marks, followed by a quote-identifying epigraph: "*New York Governor Dix.*" Readers can assume that Governor Dix, when commenting about the Triangle Fire, quickly asserted that he was "appalled" by the tragedy; Stein's nonfiction novel confirms this assumption, but also adds that the governor "declared" that he was "powerless to take the initiative in an inquiry" into the fire (Stein 114). In fact, Governor Dix placed all responsibility onto New York City authorities who, in turn, vehemently asserted their own lack of blame in the disaster. Stein's text reflects the cowardice of public officials in the matter of the Fire, as well as the "blame game" they played for days while the public demanded to know on whom to place the blame for such a significant loss of life. His phrases emphasize both the authority figures (the Deputy State Labor Commissioner, the state, the Superintendent of Buildings, etc.) and their actions—or inactions—in admitting responsibility for the fire (they "deplored the tragedy" and "pointed" and were "unable to act"). The authorities, however cowardly and inept, were responding to significant public outcry and anger: the *New York Evening Journal*, for instance, "published on its front page the drawing of gallows with the caption: 'This Ought To Fit Somebody; Who Is He?'" (Stein 114; see figure 5).

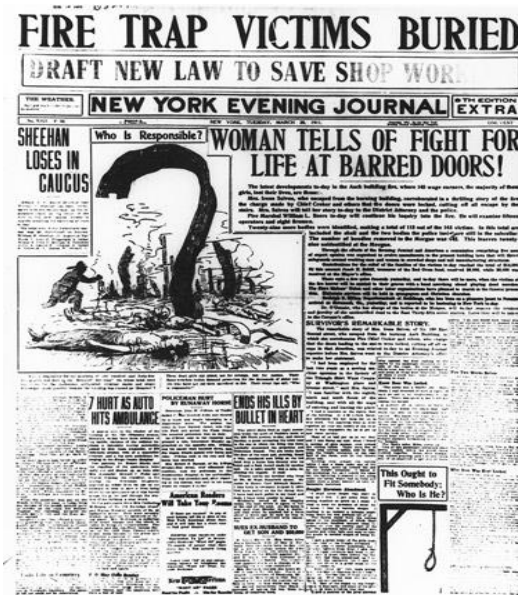


Figure 5: Dorgan, Thomas Aloysius, et al. *Fire Trap Victims Buried. Draft New Law to Save Shop Workers*. 1911. The Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M.P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, <https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/slides/242.html>.

The image of the gallows with a noose in the paper’s bottom corner speaks to an illustration at the top of the same page of the paper, which also asks, “Who is responsible?” just above a drawing by Thomas Aloysius Dorgan that features crumbling buildings, dead bodies, and a flimsy beam from a fire escape in the shape of a question mark, further highlighting the question to which the public demanded an answer.

Although Llewellyn does not include this image from the *New York Evening Journal* in her book, her poem “I am Appalled” poetically inscribes memories of the fire’s aftermath— that the public demanded to know who was to blame for the fire, and that authorities denied personal responsibility—through its anaphoric lines. Eight of the fourteen lines begin with the word, “who,” which itself functions as both a relative and interrogative pronoun:

The Police Commissioner
 gripes to the Mayor who points at
 the Governor, “I am appalled,”
 who sets on the State Labor Commissioner
 who blames the National Fire Underwriters

who turn on the Fire Commissioner
who cites the “City Beautiful”
(for finding fire escapes ugly)
who then faults the Architects
who place it on the Tenement Housing
who says failure of the Health Department
who then proclaim conspiracy
between the Utility Companies and
the Police Commissioner. (Llewellyn 25)

The use of anaphora formally conveys the frustration felt by the public when city and state officials—all denoted as proper nouns in Llewellyn’s poem, thereby suggesting that these were important individuals whom the citizens of New York were supposed to be able to trust—thrust the responsibility onto other departments. Emphasizing the verbs “sets,” “blames,” “turn,” “cites,” “faults,” and “place” in particular, the anaphoric lines suggest that the burden of guilt was passed from one authority figure to another. The poem’s terse lines and the cyclical structure of the poem (it begins and ends with the Police Commissioner) reflect that, in their rhetorical efforts to deny responsibility, the authorities essentially erased the bodies that were burned in the fire. Further, the visual effect created by the anaphora simultaneously accentuates the word, “who,” as a reader’s eyes are naturally drawn to the left side of the poem. This necessarily forces the reader to also ask, “who?” which then mirrors and responds to the question posed on the *New York Evening Journal* in figure 5.

By the end of the poem the title takes on new significance: rather than cowardly rhetoric (initially iterated by Governor Dix), “I am appalled” is the sentiment felt and expressed by contemporary readers. Although they could not have experienced the fire themselves and did not read the *Evening Journal* when it was first off the press in 1911, they have likely shared the working-class sentiment of feeling disgusted with authorities. This documentary poem thus posits a relationship between contemporary readers and the New York public of 1911; it assures

that readers *will* feel “appalled” through the reading experience as they become the “I” in the poem’s title and are frustrated with the circularity of bickering exposed in the poem. Engaged readers thus invest meaning back into Governor Dix’s empty statement from 1911 as they “tap a collective memory of class oppression and injustice” when elected public officials fail working people (Zandy, “Fire Poetry” 35). Importantly, the singular, time and place-specific “I” becomes a collective, cross-temporal/spatial “we” when multiple readers experience the frustration that New Yorkers felt in 1911 in the aftermath of the fire.

An earlier poem, “Funeral for the Nameless,” conveys a similar sentiment. A series of ten three-line stanzas, most of which are imagist-like snapshots of the mass public funeral that followed the fire on April 5, 1911, inform us of this somber, yet politicized event, when Jewish, Catholic, and Episcopal mourners were united “under a single banner: / ‘We Demand Fire Protection’” (Llewellyn 31). At Evergreen Cemetery, the destination of the funeral procession to bury the caskets of the unidentified victims, “rabbi, priest, and preacher” were present to “bless the waiting coffins” that were pulled for six hours during the procession (31). The images emphasize the weather—constant rain—during the funeral: “Women, children, the old ones / lean on sashes, stare through / rain screen” (31). Other lines focus on colors, touch, and sounds: “The bunting’s blue dye drips down / arms and faces of the honor guard” (31); “Thunder drums down the narrow stairways” (31). The crisp images work ekphrastically, often responding directly to photographs that Llewellyn accessed through the Library of Congress. In the second and third editions of the book, immediately following the poem readers view an image of the funeral line. The “rain screen” mentioned in the poem ultimately alludes to the glossy street surface photographed in the visual image (see figure 6):



Figure 6: *Trade Union Procession for Triangle Waist Co. Fire Victims*. 1911. The George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2002711809>.

Later stanzas in “Funeral for the Nameless” likely respond to other photographs that Llewellyn did not reproduce in *Fragments from the Fire*: the central image of the poem, “white horses draped in black nets / pul[ling] an empty hearse, mountain of blossoms” (31), inscribes the memory of death (symbolized by black nets; see figure 7) enveloping innocent garment workers, many of whom were children (symbolized by white horses and flowers).



Figure 7: Photograph of Net-Draped White Horses and a Flower-Laden Carriage that Led a Silent Mourning Procession. 1911. New York, New York. The Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M.P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, <https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/slides/182.html>.

Even as “thousands pour to Evergreens” Cemetery (31), the whiteness of the horses is the focal point of another untitled photograph (see figure 8).³¹ The bodies at the bottom of the photograph have moved into a nearly-perfect line to make way for the carriage pulling the caskets; this straight line pulls our eyes to the “white horses” and the “mountain of [white] blossoms” (31) that Llewellyn describes in the fifth stanza of her poem. The photograph, as well as the middle stanza of the poem, thus further emphasizes the loss of innocent lives—and innocence—in the Triangle Fire.



Figure 8: Photograph of Flower-Laden Carriage that was Pulled through Crowded Streets in Silent Funeral Procession for the Unidentified Victims of the Fire. 1911. New York, New York. The Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M.P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, <https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/slides/187.html>.

Juxtaposed against the stanzas that depict the rain, draped horses, and blossoms are excerpts from a statement given by Rose Schneiderman, former child garment worker and feminist activist and organizer for the Women’s Trade Union League. Schneiderman’s words, taken from Leon Stein’s *The Triangle Fire*, are identified by italics; they function in the poem as a type of voice-over, as we might experience in a documentary film that straddles the expository, observational, and participatory modes of documentary filmmaking.³² Immediately following the poem’s attention to the “honor guard, / eight of [the] youngest garment girls” in the funeral

parade (31), Schneiderman's words direct the audience's attention upward to the "*tops of tenements*" where other garment girls are "*bending out of windows / watching*" the procession (31). Again, after the primary speaker of the poem refocuses the reader's attention to the horses, black nets, hearse, and blossoms on the ground, Schneiderman's "voice over" repeats: "*There they are on tops of hundreds of / buildings—structures no different from / the Asch Building*" (31). Schneiderman's words call attention to the fact that the Triangle Fire was not a natural disaster, in contrast to the heavy rains they experienced during the funeral procession. Indeed, everything about the fire was unnatural: the tenements and buildings that house the garment girls are "*structures*" (31), alluding to the systems—social and economic—that led to the human-created workplace disaster. Like the social documentary texts and FSA projects of the 1930s, Schneiderman's words show humanity "at the grips with conditions neither necessary nor permanent, conditions of a certain time and place" (Stott 20). Schneiderman continues, "as for lacking / Fire protection, many [buildings] much worse / than Triangle" (Llewellyn 31). Her voice-over concludes by noting that "It is this"—the unnatural systems that persist at the expense of working people—"not the / cold rain, that makes [her] sick" (31). This poem, as well as the visual images in figures 6, 7, and 8, are "not merely 'evidence'" of the storms and mass procession (Finnegan xv); they are "by their very nature rhetorical" (xv). Like the FSA photographs of the 1930s, Llewellyn's documentary image-texts and poetics "purport...to offer 'real'...views of the world but [are] able to do so only through the framing and construction of those views" through her ekphrastic practice and sampling of already-published documents (xv). Her documentary practice forms her readers' understanding of a particular event through its rhetorical staging of specific documents; Llewellyn, via Schneiderman, again announces that she is on the side of the garment girls.

“Funeral for the Nameless” and the book overall clearly explore the relationship between garment workers and capital, and they attempt to account for the suffering experienced by the workers under capitalism. But, like much contemporary poetry, Llewellyn models a documentary practice that is didactic without “being prescriptive” (Vance 342), as it constantly invites engagement on the part of the reader. Her demand of the reader, and the reader’s response to this demand, acts upon the workers who, at the level of the text, seem to be trapped on the pages in the poetry or photographs. But readers act upon Llewellyn’s image-text because the text has acted upon them; the emotional truth conveyed through the poetry and photographs, the legalistic and human documents excerpted and sampled throughout the book, and the pathetic appeal of the narrative forms move readers and encourage them to enliven the poetic subjects by actively reading and responding to the poly-vocal text. There is something medieval about the way we are invited to participate in the reading of Llewellyn’s documentary book. As Mary Carruthers’s describes in her *Book of Memory*, the “medieval understanding of the complete process of reading does not observe in the same way the basic distinction we make between ‘what I read in a book’ and ‘my experience’” (55). She explains that, for the medieval reader, “‘what I read in a book’ is ‘my experience,’ and I make it mine by incorporating it (and we should understand the word ‘incorporate’ quite literally) in my memory” (55). According to Carruthers, the medieval reader’s relation to a text is highly physical; there was a “‘gut-level response’” to what was read, and reading itself was “an emotional process that cause[d] changes in the body” (55). Thus, by acting upon the text and by allowing the text to act upon them, readers participate in the construction of a real experience, in particular one that helps liberate the memories of garment workers and that potentially calls attention to the economic inequities of the readers’ own historical moment.

Llewellyn's poem "Jury of Peers," which follows "Funeral for the Nameless," provides the most salient example of the kind of work Llewellyn expects her audience to do when reading her documentary project. In this poem, Llewellyn first lists the names of the jurors who served at the trial of Triangle owners Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, known in the garment industry in 1911 as "the shirtwaist kings" (Stein 158), and who were indicted on a manslaughter charge in April following the fire. Llewellyn draws directly from Leon Stein's non-fiction novel about the Triangle Fire to list the jurors' names,³³ as well as their business interests. From this list, we initially learn that all the jurors were men. In a book of poems that recounts a sweatshop fire in which mostly women died, and who participated in an industry in which mostly women worked and still work, Llewellyn seems intent on exposing that men, not women, judged the male factory owners "not guilty" at the conclusion of the eighteen day trial in December, 1911.

In addition, her staging of their business trades reveals, from the poem's perspective, that the jurors' class interests were likely not the same as the women who died in the fire. These male jurors were in "sales," "real estate," and "management"; they were "importer[s]" and "buyer[s]" and sold "shirt[s]" and "cigars" (34). That is, the men were in the business of doing business and likely profited from the work of their employees, a sentiment that echoes an article from the *Literary Digest* in 1911: "Perhaps the men on the jury had no thought of condoning murder, but that is what they did...They did it because they recognized the basic fact that their own interests were involved in such an action. They stood by their fellow manufacturers and set them free" ("147 Dead..." 7). However, rather than drawing this conclusion for her readers in an exposé or opinion piece, Llewellyn exposes a potentially biased justice system and class inequities by "alternat[ing] and juxtapos[ing] documentary frames to draw out their interrelatedness—an interrelatedness that the poet has discovered and/or created but which [she] doesn't assert or state

so much as stage” (Vance 340). Throughout this poem, Llewellyn creates what David Ray Vance would call a “multivalent dialectic that invites[s] inquiry,” rather than that “assert[s] claims” (342, 346), while still maintaining a political stand on historical events.

The poem continues to sample passages from Stein’s book *The Triangle Fire* in additional stanzas. Readers learn that one juror, H. Houston Hierst, was “perfectly at rest” with his vote for the not guilty verdict (Stein 199). Hierst asserts that “the type / of girl you have at Triangle / is basically less intelligent...most of em can’t even read / or speak English—and the way / they live! They’re lots less intelligent than the / type of female you find / in other walks of life. I mean / that kinda worker is more— / well—susceptible to panic. Emotional females can’t / Keep a clear head” (Llewellyn 34). The blatant sexism, classism, and racism in Hierst’s statements are appalling to contemporary readers, but the contradictory and humanizing photograph following the poem further highlights the irony that *he* was put in a position to judge the Triangle owners without bias.

To further encourage her readers to question the legitimacy of the “not-guilty” verdict, Llewellyn stages a photograph immediately following the poem. In the photograph, over a dozen women pose for a picture with their sewing machines. Nothing about the photograph suggests that the women were more “susceptible to panic” (34): the women’s eyes are focused, stern, and their general posture is not one of a group of emotional women who “can’t / Keep a clear head,” as Hierst suggests, but instead indicates a controlled, reasonable group of women (see figure 9):



Figure 9: *Garment Girls, June 1911.* 1911. *Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911*, by Chris Llewellyn, Viking P, 1987, p. 45.

In addition, the line breaks of the poem's final stanza actually make Hierst, the speaker of the final lines, sound like the irrational, frantic one. Splicing together Hierst's testimony with the imagined reactions of onlookers who were horrified by the sight of women and girls jumping from a building, the stanza reads:

Emotional females can't
 Keep a clear head they
 panicked and jumped my
 conscience is clearly
 Act of Almighty
 God they jumped
 conclusion Your
 Honor owners
 of Triangle
 not guilty. (34)

The line breaks, which force Hierst into a fast-paced, frenzied state, and the staging of the photograph directly beside the poem, undermine Hierst's comments in the second and third stanzas. Thus, through Llewellyn's staging of documents and our engagement with them, the garments workers are enlivened and afforded agency to finally judge Harris, Blanck, the male

jurors, the “not guilty” verdict, and the entire criminal justice system, again resonating with the sentiments expressed by many mourners following the fire and the trial:

...the verdict of the jury in this case by no means settles it. There is another jury that considers the matter, and it is not made up alone of stricken relatives of the murdered women. It is made up of the entire working class. For that horrible murder in the Asch building was one that concerned the whole working class because it was typical of the conditions under which they must gain their daily bread. (“147 Dead...” 7)

Juxtaposed against the poem, then, the photograph likewise suggests that the real “peers” of the girls who died in the fire were not the male jurors who judged Harris and Blanck, but the women garment workers who continued to work in the garment industry after the Fire (in fact, this photo was taken in June 1911, three months after the fire). The photograph subtly reveals the camaraderie felt by women garment workers: in the photograph, we can see the women’s hands wrapped around each other’s backs and shoulders and posing as if they are working with their machines. The visual rhetoric of this image suggests that these women are united not simply because they are deep friends—“sweethearts,” as we read in “March 25, 1911”—but because they share labor and a particular class position. Importantly, this poem-image sequence *ends* with the garment girls—their faces, eyes, and hands, as well as their symbolic judgment of the economic system and human errors that led to the Triangle Fire—suggesting that women garment workers will always have the last word and will thus have the opportunity to make the final move in the struggle for better working conditions. The women’s eyes in this photograph demand that we not look away; their unflinching stares draw us in and invite us to judge Harris, Blanck, and the capitalist system of production that ultimately led to the deaths of their sweethearts, the same production system that led to the return of the sweatshops and workplace

disasters in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Readers of the photo-poetic staging can likewise create a new, symbolic experience in which they, too, resist the verdict and Hierst's derogatory comments. Moreover, the textual solidarity enacted on these pages can further model for readers the kind of solidarity work that must be extended beyond the book. In the social documentary tradition of the 1930s, Llewellyn's project is most assuredly a call to awareness, to new ways of seeing and making connections, and to solidarity action in the here-and-now.

Part 4:

The Atrocity Photograph and Internationalist Textual Solidarity in *Fragments*

Reader and text animate each other in *Fragments from the Fire* to create a new experience in which reader and subject are connected through emotional appeal and a shared, even if not fully realized, class position. This symbiotic animation further creates a textual space in which bodies are brought back to life so that they may speak about class inequities, personal loss, and injustice, or so that their presence may be felt again.³⁴ This makes it all the more vexing that Llewellyn chose to include in all editions of her book a now iconic image from the Triangle Fire that reveals police officers looking upward at the fire in the Asch building while bundles of clothes and bodies lay at their feet (see figure 10).



Figure 10: Brown Brothers. Photograph of Dead Workers on Sidewalk with Policemen and Others Looking Upward. 1911. Courtesy of the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M.P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, <https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/slides/151.html>.

The image is troubling: the reader is positioned behind the camera, as if she were present as dozens of women jumped from the Asch building to avoid the heat and flames. And the reader, like the police officials in the photograph, can only stare. This image, taken by the Brown Brothers, is most certainly an “atrocious photograph” even though this term was not used in 1911 when the images of “sidewalk dead” were taken, and even though the term is most commonly

used to describe war and Holocaust photos from WWII to the present. Versions of this image appeared in newspapers after the Triangle Fire, as on the front page of *The New York Herald* (see figure 11), but what was the purpose of including this image of “sidewalk dead” on the front page of *The New York Herald*? What was its rhetorical function?



Figure 11: Scan of Front Page of *The New York Herald*. March 26, 1911. “Why the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Still Burns Hot Today,” by Amy Feldman, *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/amyfeldman/2019/11/22/why-the-triangle-shirtwaist-factory-fire-still-burns-hot-today/?sh=4f5e344e704a>.

As Susan Sontag suggests in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “Photographs of atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen” (13). Juxtaposed against headlines that read, “Only One Fire Escape” and “Women and Girls...Lost in Flames or Hurl Themselves to Death,” the image of “sidewalk dead” was likely meant to be provocative as it tapped the feelings of agony *and* anger felt by the victims’ families, surviving garment workers, and union activists. Given the wave of protests that followed the Triangle Fire—which ostensibly eradicated child labor from the United States garment industry; inspired

dramatic reform (led by Frances Perkins, the “woman behind the New Deal,” Al Smith, and others) inside the corrupt Democratic Party; brought safety codes to buildings; and led to the creation of the Factory Investigating Committee and the American Society of Safety Engineers—we can now claim that the images of atrocity that circulated after the fire successfully testified to the mass deaths and to the need for a type of “revenge”: a working class movement and reform policies. Of course, the momentum for such a mass movement had been building over the previous decade, and the American public of 1911 had not been “anesthetize[d]” from the “repeated exposure to images” of atrocity, as Sontag would likely argue about late-twentieth-century readers (Sontag, *On Photography* 20).

As historian Arthur McEvoy’s suggests:

[b]y focusing on and making tangible causal theories that had been in circulation for some time but never embodied successfully in the law, the Triangle Fire destroyed longstanding ideological barriers to factory legislation. It thus played a significant role in laying the epistemological foundation of the modern regulatory state. (621)

The images of Triangle Fire atrocity that circulated helped with this ideological shift, as they seemed to “strengthen [their viewers’] conscience and the ability to be compassionate” so that audiences would be moved to take meaningful action (Sontag, *On Photography* 20). But the specific image of “sidewalk dead” above is, by today’s standards, relatively tame; in black and white, with the bodies’ wounds out of view from the camera’s and the audience’s eyes, the image of “sidewalk dead” undoubtedly impacts Llewellyn’s contemporary readership quite differently than the *Herald*’s in 1911, which calls to mind Sontag’s claims in her 1973 treatise on photography:

The vast photographic catalogue of misery and injustice throughout the world has given everyone a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem ordinary—making it appear familiar, remote...inevitable. At the time of the first photographs of the Nazi camps, there was nothing banal about these images. After thirty years, a saturation point may have been reached. In these last decades, “concerned” photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it. (*On Photography* 21)

While I disagree with Sontag’s claim about the deadening of conscience, I am interested in thinking through the rhetorical function of the image of “sidewalk dead” in Llewellyn’s text overall given postmodern concerns with representing suffering, including the oft-discussed “problem of the privileged speaking *for* rather than *with* the oppressed, thereby situating oneself as an authenticating presence” (Hesford 107). Ultimately, I am interested in what is being “heard” and how it is “heard” when one bears witness to the testimony offered in the image of “sidewalk dead,” as well as in its framing poems—“Twenty-Sixth Street Pier” and “Mercer Street Precinct Report”—in Llewellyn’s book.

In each edition of *Fragments from the Fire*, the image of “sidewalk dead” is preceded by “Twenty-Sixth Street Pier,” a short, four-part poem with the epigraph/subtitle, “*A temporary morgue.*” “Misery Lane,” as the pier was aptly called before and after the Triangle Fire, indeed functioned as a morgue in which the Triangle victims’ unidentified bodies were lined for family members to search for their loved ones—the same place where, “Not so long ago you’d see / the blind and insane / beggars and homeless-old / boarding for the poorhouse / of the T.B. hospital” (Llewellyn 21). The poem’s final part, a re-phrasing of an interview with a “derelict,” summarizes the scene from 1911:

Opium dives, canned-heat alleys
a night in the can’s better than

coppers and corpses. I'd rather
the dry-heaves from dogcheap rotgut
or the DT's than seeing brothers
search for their sisters or
mothers calling for their sons. (Llewellyn 21)

This seven-line stanza, in the voice of one of society's throw-aways, underscores the horror of the site, and the emotional exhaustion experienced by police, coroners, and the "derelicts and doctors [who] worked among the dead, the latter in the hope that someone might have survived" (Stein 96), but it avoids the melodrama of Leon Stein's nonfiction novel, which provides a litany of images of "mothers calling for their sons." Stein recounts via the *Times* that "Several women had to be taken to Bellevue for treatment" after seeing the bodies (97), and that a "little shawled woman...stopped the crowd" with her scream after she "feel to her knees" when she reached the coffin numbered 15 (Stein 98). Many of Stein's documentary images thus depict hysterical women whose shrieks were controlled only by male police officers with clubs.

Llewellyn's poem, on the other hand, avoids the gendered assumptions that underlie Stein's reportage; moreover, Llewellyn seems to be keenly aware that she is a poet producing a text "after Auschwitz," even though many of her historical sources (about Jewish garment workers being burned or suffocated in a building in which they were trapped) were produced "before Auschwitz." The events of the Triangle Fire, its immediate aftermath when parents and siblings searched burned bodies, some without torsos, and the greed and recklessness that led to it all are, in many ways, unspeakable. These events and actions are, as many writers suggest about the Holocaust, "'inhuman' and hence...inaccessible to human understanding, external to the speech communities that form human cultures" (Mandel 210). Thus, Llewellyn's "Twenty-Sixth Street Pier" is marked by gesture rather than direct representation of the scene it wants to document. In the poem, readers do not "see" the "fifty six [bodies that] were burned or crushed beyond

physical recognition” or the “body of one girl [that] was headless” (Stein 98). Instead, the fourth part’s speaker notes that he prefers the “dry-heaves from dogcheap rotgut” and the D.T.s from withdrawal to the utter helplessness and agony experienced by the family members who searched for (and found) their loves ones. The representation of the atrocity, “contingent [upon a] structure of language [that] forces it into a representation that is, necessarily, a radical *misrepresentation*” (Mandel 210), is avoided in this poem. In its place is a testament to the emotional truth of the moment, an emotional truth that is testified to by an alcoholic who is “do[ing] the dirty work” of sorting through the bodies (Llewellyn 21). Punctuated by what at first seems to be irony—a member of the class of “undeserving poor”³⁵ claiming to prefer bouts of alcoholism and withdrawal to watching people cry—this poem affirms the dignity of the experience of searching for workers who were laid in the “temporary morgue.” But it also simultaneously affirms the human dignity of the “undeserving poor” by noting that “panhandlers poured [families] coffee, / held up the fainting” (21). The “derelicts” maintain the moral high ground, particularly as they are contrasted with the “[l]adies in lace shirtwaists, gentlemen in frock-coats” who “caught the stage-buses to the Twenty-sixth Street Pier...demand[ing] they / be let through, so as to view” the burned bodies (21), as if attending a theater performance. The hypocritical and spectacular actions of the “[h]igh-hats in the long lines leading to the dead” undercut the discourse that suggested poverty was a moral flaw; indeed, the wealthiest of society elicited some of the more troubling, morally-flawed responses to the Triangle Fire.

Immediately following “Sidewalk Dead” is Llewellyn’s poem, “Mercer Street Precinct Report.” Organized into two parts, the poem first anaphorizes an imagined list of materials gathered at the scene of the fire:

One gent’s watchcase
One man’s garter

One razor strop.

One-half dozen postcards

One yellow metal ring

One one-dollar bill.

One lady's purse with rosary

One small mirror

One pin with painted picture. (23)

The first and third verses gender certain items found, whereas the second verse lists items that could have belonged to any of the women or men that died in the fire: postcards, a wedding ring, or money. With these images of material objects belonging to the dead, Llewellyn evokes real human bodies that once touched them: the men who held their watchcases with their hands and wore their sleeve garters on their arms; the women who clutched their rosaries with their fingers and displayed their brooches on their chests. As readers, we are brought closer to the objects and bodies that the fire has claimed; combined with the preceding photograph of "Sidewalk Dead," the poem refuses to allow us to turn away from material reality of bodies, their death *and* past life. The second part of this poem then zooms in closer on the "one pin with painted picture" to ekphrastically describe the pastoral and domestic world inscribed on the brooch: "little / wood sticks stalk garden walk / Birds weaving cumulus dive to tulips" and "Inside shuttered cottage walls" life continues to happen as "Kit and Kat lick whiskers, purr / by fire. Kettle spurts water" (23). *Fragments'* recurring images of fire and water thus enliven the scene on the brooch pin; the ekphrasis of the scene is not a "still moment," as is the photograph on the previous page. Rather, the ekphrasis embraces the constant motion and dynamism of life. As such, the ekphrasis is a gesture toward bringing bodies back to life—to both embody the words about Triangle victims found in Llewellyn's volume and to memorialize these victims as martyrs of working-class struggle.

Fragments from the Fire and these three texts in particular (the image of “Sidewalk Dead,” and its framing poems “Twenty-Sixth Street Pier” and “Mercer Street Precinct Report”) thus document the relationship between American workers and capital, between the working/poverty classes and the bourgeoisie, but what makes Llewellyn’s documentary praxis particularly radical is her subtle, yet unmistakable, internationalist perspective. Llewellyn chose to conclude her book with a 1911 poem written by Japanese poet, pacifist, and social reformer Yosano Akiko. In this nine-line poem, the speaker announces that “The mountain-moving day is coming [when] All sleeping women now will / awake and move” (Llewellyn 59). She recalls that “in the past / All mountains moved in fire” (59), and that someday soon, these fiery women, likened here to a volcano, will erupt in action. The inclusion of this poem is significant on a number of levels: first, in a book of poetry that, at least in its content, is decidedly American, Llewellyn reminds her readers that the gendered division of labor, women’s oppression, and economic-class divisions are not experienced solely in the United States. In 1911, women poets in other countries were calling for solidarity among women across nations; her inclusion of “The Day When Mountains Moved” is, therefore, a testament to this call for global solidarity.

In addition, though, for Llewellyn’s audience in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the image of mountains and women moving in fire takes on a more tragic tone while it inspires collective action. First, we are reminded of the garment workers who moved in fire during the Triangle disaster of 1911, but even starker is Llewellyn’s subtle allusion to warfare in this poem. While Yosano died shortly before the outbreak of WWII, she was committed to non-violent anti-war protest in her own country throughout the first half of the century. We can thus guess what her reaction would have been to the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the conclusion of the War. Llewellyn’s readers might connect the fire in this poem

that is written by a Japanese anti-war poet to atrocity photographs of cities and bodies burning and burned that were circulated after World War II. While the poem itself cannot actually be alluding to the dropping of the atomic bombs, from a reader-response perspective, the poem likely elicits vexed reactions to its suggestion that bodies and the earth in Japan are afire. Strategically staged in her book of poetry about an American tragedy, then, is a poem that invites readers to think about the effects of capital across the globe, reminding them that, from the poetry's perspective, horrors take place internationally, and that global solidarity may be the only solution to such global problems.

It is no accident, either, that the poet breaks the final two lines of Yosano's poem after the word "will," thereby interrupting the grammatical structure of the lines, "All sleeping women now will / awake and move" so that the final line is a directive: "awake and move" (59). This line shifts the poem's meaning away from the speaker's assertion of her own beliefs and calls its readers to cease their slumber and to act. In the context of Llewellyn's book, this last line invites action by encouraging readers to consider the gaps in their memories and to respond to the spark ignited by the documentary poetry. Since *Fragments* was first published in 1987, and again in 1993 and 2016, we, as readers, can "awake and move" by uncovering and listening to the voices of immigrant women garment workers in the United States who were organizing for better working conditions in the late twentieth century, much like the immigrant women workers were doing in the early twentieth century. By liberating such memories of our multi-ethnic working-class history, we would resurrect voices from "New York City's Chinese Staff and Workers Association, La Mujer Obrera in Texas and California's Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates" (Featherstone 248), who often succeeded in their struggles for improved working conditions. Llewellyn's sampling of Yosano's poem, then, functions as an allusion, demanding that readers

search for source material that gave rise both to Yosano's poem and to Llewellyn's inclusion of it her own volume.

Once readers understand that "The Day When Mountains Moved" works symbolically, rhetorically, and allusively, they will likewise be encouraged to consider the mass demonstrations and publicity campaigns that have demanded stronger labor and safety laws and improved working conditions throughout the past century. In doing so, readers will likely make connections between exploitation *and* resistance across time and geographic location, between the social movement following the Triangle Fire of 1911 and the "Wisconsin Uprising" a hundred years later, in which thousands of people marched on their state capitol after the governor took measures to curtail collective bargaining rights; or between the first-ever worker-led walkouts from US Walmarts on "Black Friday" in 2012 and the fifteen-thousand-strong protest near Dhaka, Bangladesh a week later, organized after the Tazreen Fashions Factory workers died while sewing products for major US retailers, including Walmart.

In making such connections, readers will discover significant victories and organizing possibilities. In 2009, for example, Bangladeshi garment workers at the R. L. Denim Factory won improved working and safety conditions, paid maternity leave, overtime pay, and the right to work toward forming an independent union. This victory was made possible by the courageous grassroots organizing efforts of the workers at R. L. Denim and through the solidarity work of unions and human rights organizations around the world. As the Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights has noted, "this was international solidarity" at its best: the United Steelworkers in the US coordinated with "Workers Uniting and the UNITE union in the United Kingdom and the *Verdi* union in Germany. The German Clean Clothes Campaign and the Central American Romero Christian Initiative [also] played key roles," as did the National

Garment Workers' Federation of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity, and student and human rights activists in the US ("Alerts..."). This unprecedented victory underscores the importance of organizing against sweatshops—a global problem—through international solidarity.

This conclusion—the need for international solidarity—is not directly called for in Llewellyn's *Fragments*. Instead, her aesthetic and rhetorical strategies, particularly her staging of Yosano Akiko's poem, allude to this necessity. Thus, while Michelle Tokarczyk claims that Llewellyn's poems "stop short of depicting recognition of solidarity between working-class people of different ethnic or racial backgrounds" (Tokarczyk 868), I suggest that Llewellyn's poetry embraces a textual solidarity that enacts and invites such working-class connection-making. Llewellyn demands that we (women and the working class around the world) return to our natural state and again become collective forces—volcanoes—of change. Llewellyn sees a role for poetry, especially with the poetic strategies of appropriation and allusion, to enact such mountainous change with its direct and indirect moves toward internationalist textual solidarity.

Conclusions: Experiential Reading

Llewellyn's specific photo-poetic project recognizes that the memory of working-class radicalism and consciousness too frequently vanishes from America's collective memory. Contemporary Marxist historian Paul D'Amato accounts for this collective unconsciousness, suggesting that working-class struggle in the United States "has followed a boom and bust pattern: extended periods of surface calm interrupted by huge explosions" (280). Unfortunately, "[e]ach new wave of struggle has not necessarily had the benefit of learning from the experiences of previous waves," which means that memories of working class resistance have

been “continually lost, and then relearned” (280). *Fragments from the Fire*’s documentary praxis intervenes in this aphasia by recollecting and staging historical information; further, by poetically commemorating the working-class consciousness and struggles surrounding the Triangle Fire, Llewellyn’s text intervenes on an ideological level as well. The active reading of the text begins to reintegrate a set of collective experiences and memories so that this collective may develop a keener sense of its class position in its national and global contexts.

Llewellyn’s book of memory is thus not merely one that recalls the experiences of garment workers (though it does this); *Fragments from the Fire* is also the *source* of experience. As John Tagg notes in *The Burden of Representation*, the photograph is “not the inflection of a prior reality...but the production of a new and specific reality...in specific contexts, by specific forces, for more or less defined purposes” (3). That is, memories are not static: they come and go through time, are arranged and rearranged in our minds and in public performances, and grow into new life when they are recalled again by a collective. For the recollections of Llewellyn’s text to be meaningful, however, the kind of attentive reading typical of medieval scholars must be exercised. *Fragments from the Fire* demands that the experiences in the text become its readers’ experiences, in part because the memories embodied in the text *are* shared by readers who are, in nearly every case, people who have been affected by work or the absence of it within global capitalism; as Amy Kolen, a descendant of a Triangle Fire survivor, wrote in 2011: “All of us have family members who were once immigrants, and most of us have relatives who, trying to better their lives, left their homelands for menial jobs and worked long hours in miserable, unsafe conditions to feed their families and send money back home” (Kolen). Of course, the memories recorded in the text will not be the same as the ones that form after a reader experiences them in the act of reading, since, as Carruthers notes, “[r]eading a book extends the

process whereby one memory engages another in a continuing dialogue [which is] like a ‘hermeneutic dialogue’ between two memories” (Carruthers 56). The type of reading demanded by Llewellyn’s documentary poetics calls to mind the Greek verb *ánagignósko*, which means “‘to read,’ but literally,” as Carruthers notes, “‘to know again’ or ‘remember’” (56). Llewellyn asks her audience to read her book so that they may “know again” the memories of their collective, so that these memories and this knowledge can take root in the readers’ present reality as action toward the future.

The work being done between reader, text, and context—this multi-relational poetic—calls to mind what Joseph Roach refers to as a “vortex of behavior,” a “kind of spatially induced carnival, a center of cultural self-invention through the restoration of behavior” (Roach 28). As Roach explains, the vortex is a site for “transgressions” to be committed (28), but more importantly, it provides a “place in which everyday practices and attitudes may be legitimated, ‘brought out into the open,’ reinforced, celebrated, or intensified” (28). The “practices” and events that arise within the vortex “gain a powerful enough hold on collective memory that they will survive the transformation or the relocation of the spaces in which they first flourished” (28). While Roach uses this concept to describe carnivalesque performances in multiple cityscapes, it is useful to consider Llewellyn’s *Fragments from the Fire* as a textual “vortex of behavior,” a space with pieces of knowledge and traces of memory staged by Llewellyn, but performed by multiple “actors”: written text, image-text, blank space, and the readers. Her social documentary book, as a vortex, invites itself to be acted upon, creating a dynamic site in which victimized garment workers come alive to judge the past, to tell stories that have been willfully forgotten by a global system of exploitation, and to haunt their victimizers *and* readers who would prefer not to listen to their “words of fire” (Llewellyn 51). Readers, enmeshed in this

vortex, commit transgressions when they pause to identify with the lived experiences of the garment workers, when they make connections between the incompetence of the authorities in 1911 and the unsatisfactory performances of authority figures in their own context.

By the end of Llewellyn's book, active readers, having helped activate the text's performance, consciously or unconsciously recall and experience attitudes, thoughts, and emotions that may not be legitimated or condoned within the dominant society; however, the participation in these "practices," as Roach notes, contribute to the collective memory of working-class struggle so that they can survive, in some form, once the textual performance has concluded. The knowledge gained within the vortex, that is, continues to persist, and the "transgression" committed may take the form of political subversion or direct action as some of the main performers—the readers—relocate from the text to their classrooms, workplaces, homes, and streets. Such engaged readers remind us that change must be enacted—just as garment workers and their allies demonstrated in their collective strikes and organizing at the turn of the twentieth century—because, as Joseph Roach concludes in *Cities of the Dead*, "[j]ustice can no longer be *imagined* as something that merely exists; it is something that must, finally, be *done*. Only then will the Cities of the Dead be truly free to welcome the new generations of the living" (Roach 286; emphasis added).

In Chapter Three, I discuss the social documentary books by poet-activist Mark Nowak and photographer Ian Teh. Like Llewellyn, Nowak chronicles the plight of the working-class in his twenty-first century books of poetry, *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004) and *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009). While Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire* focuses on the Triangle Fire of 1911 and its aftermath, Nowak's *Shut Up Shut Down* centers of the pervasive unemployment along the Rust Belt following the closings of factories in historic industrial areas. *Coal Mountain Elementary*

extends Nowak's poetic archival work by concentrating on the coal mining industry, with a particular focus on the Sago Mine disaster of 2006. As Nowak himself has suggested, his poetry grew from his working-class roots, as well as his Marxist critique of the neoliberal world order that contributed to the outsourcing of American workers' jobs *and* the near ubiquitous assumption that foreign workers are to blame for employment rates in the United States. Like Llewellyn, Nowak's identity, theoretical focus, and poetic eye have been shaped by the anti-union conservatism of the Reagan administration, as well as the rollbacks on worker rights that were continued during the Clinton Administration. And Nowak's overall compositional practice can be characterized by internationalist textual solidarity, to an even greater extent than Llewellyn's in *Fragments*.

Chapter Three:

Ekphrasis, Parataxis, and Internationalist Textual Solidarity in Mark Nowak's *Shut Up Shut Down and Coal Mountain Elementary*

It was intended...that the text be read continuously, as music is listened to or a film watched, with brief pauses only where they are self-evident.

The text was [also] written with reading aloud in mind...it is suggested that the reader attend with his ear to what he takes off the page: for variations of tone, pace, shape, and dynamics are here particularly unavailable to the eye alone, and with their loss, a good deal of meaning escapes.

~ James Agee, "Preface," *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

As Michael Davidson has suggested in his 2008 essay “On the Outskirts of Form: Cosmopoetics in the Shadow of NAFTA,” Mark Nowak’s poetics have been particularly informed by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a trade agreement between Mexico, the United States, and Canada, which was passed in 1994. Davidson explains in his study on Nowak’s *Shut Up Shut Down* that the effects of free trade agreements on working communities in the US and abroad have decimated once-thriving industrial towns and urban areas throughout the United States. He notes, “When it was passed...NAFTA was seen as an agreement between equal trading partners that promised the removal of tariffs and restrictions on both material and intellectual property among the three countries” (Davidson 736-737). However, NAFTA has benefitted large, corporate manufactures, rather than workers making the products; in fact, NAFTA has “contributed to the undermining of labor standards and the inhibiting of the right to unionize,” particularly in Mexico (Borris 12). The offshore apparel industry, addressed in my discussion of the documentary poetics of Chris Llewellyn, starkly illustrates this reality: the working conditions in garment factories in the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico are characterized by “twenty-hour workdays forced on workers to fill their quotas, widespread sexual harassment, coercive birth control, brutal suppression of labor organization, and starvation wages” (A. Ross 233). This depiction of the “new sweatshop” conditions in the global South reveals just how severely free-trade measures have impacted the lives of workers, especially women and girls in the garment industry.

The gradual decline of labor standards in the late-twentieth-century United States, the extension of global free-trade initiatives, and the rise of weak labor laws in developing nations have all contributed to the reintroduction of sweatshops—in multiple industries—even inside the United States. These new sweatshops appear strikingly similar to their nineteenth- and early-

twentieth-century predecessors: they are characterized by low or withheld pay, repetitive work, long hours, unpaid and forced overtime, physical abuse, unsafe working conditions, and a subcontracting system of labor. Even the United States General Accounting Office (or GAO, now called the Government Accountability Office), reported in 1994 that “sweatshop working conditions remain a major problem in the US garment industry” and that “the description of today’s sweatshops differs little from that at the turn of the century” (Morra).

Michael Davidson further elaborates upon the empty, “phantasmal” promises of NAFTA, particularly for the poor and working classes. He notes:

...far from improving access to healthcare, medicines, and sanitation [globalization] has increased disabilities and disease by privatizing healthcare, exposing workers to industrial waste, and denying access to cheap, generic drugs... Instead of an increase in environmental protections throughout the three countries, there has been a precipitous reduction of unified standards leading to increased pollution, toxic spills, and deregulation. (Davidson 737)

Davidson suggests that Mark Nowak’s unorthodox anti-capitalist book of poetry, *Shut Up Shut Down*, traces the effects of neoliberal policies—including corporate globalization and the proliferation of “free trade zones”—on historic working-class towns along the Rust Belt. From Detroit to Youngstown to Minnesota, these former industrial centers “have seen their populations decimated by plant closings, union busting legislation, and labor outsourcing during the Reagan and Bush administrations” (Davidson 744).

Nowak’s documentary text, which engages with various forms of visual, print, and oral culture, offers a grim picture of economically destitute communities along the Rust Belt, and how the neoliberal world order impacts the lives of working people. While not always apparent

in the poems, Davidson suggests that there exists a direct correlation between the rise of global capitalism and the destruction of once-thriving communities in the US, as the “movement of global labor has turned small towns in the rust belt into ghost towns, their local infrastructure impacted by events in far flung zones of outsourced labor and trade” (Davidson 738). Paula Rabinowitz’s 2011 article, “‘Between the outhouse and the garbage dump’: Locating Collapse in Depression Literature,” echoes Davidson’s argument that Nowak’s poetry was born out of economic struggle and devastation. Rather than consider in general the neoliberal policies and rise of global free-trade agreements, however, Rabinowitz concentrates specifically on how Nowak’s poetry and photographs offer an iconography distinct from that of the 1930s to help us better understand the years leading up to the “Great Recession” of 2008. She notes that this recession was characterized by “foreclosures and unemployment spread[ing] across all sectors of the country” (32), thereby “reframing the locations of collapse” from rural farming towns, which are commonly depicted in the art from the 1930s, to “inner core urban areas to suburbs and edge city exurbs, from Detroit to Miami” (32).

The following sections build from the conversations already begun by Davidson, Rabinowitz, and Nowak himself. Like these scholars, I argue that Nowak’s *Shut Up Shut Down* offers an argument about the negative effects of capitalism on working people. Through his dynamic interplay of documents, especially photographs, interview testimony, and news reports, Nowak ultimately advocates for an internationalist approach to labor history and challenges both neoliberal and protectionist policies. My close readings of Nowak’s poetry, which are informed by contemporary theory on the visual arts, extend and deepen the discussion about the social, political, and artistic gift that Nowak’s poetics has to offer present and future readers. I further suggest that the imaginative and original work—the *inventio*—of his documentary texts resides

in his ekphrastic engagement with architectural photographs, dramatic staging of personal testimony and found materials, and use of paratactic montage techniques. I first offer close readings of select poems in “\$00/Line/Steel/Train,” the first section of *Shut Up Shut Down*. I argue that this opening poetic sequence introduces the central themes that Nowak will explore throughout *Shut Up Shut Down*. In the final section of this chapter I analyze Nowak’s *Coal Mountain Elementary*, arguing that it further extends the documentary techniques and internationalist approach to labor studies begun in *Shut Up Shut Down*.

Part 1:

An Interarts Approach to Nowak's "S00/Line/Steel/Train"

“\$00/Line/Steel/Train,” the opening sequence of Nowak’s *Shut Up Shut Down*, introduces readers to the central themes of the book overall, as well as to Nowak’s oeuvre. In this section, Nowak both documents and accounts for workers’ suffering under capitalism,³⁶ though he does not romanticize working-class culture. Like his contemporary Jim Daniels, in his exposition of suffering and job loss, Nowak documents the sexism, racism, and xenophobia that is often present in working-class communities. However, Nowak ultimately argues that capitalism is to blame for such issues, particularly for the racial divisions within labor’s history. “\$00/Line/Steel/Train” clarifies that the dominant economic system—global capitalism—both relies and thrives upon divisions within the working class. His ekphrastic strategies provide a discursive form of anti-capitalist resistance that offers his readers the cognitive and affective tools to transfer this resistance to their own communities of work.

The prose and fragmentary poems within “\$00/Line/Steel/Train” have been assembled from a number of sources, all of which are cited at the end of this first section of Nowak’s volume. From the Works Cited page and the prefatory note to this section, we learn that the poems in this opening section refer to photographs from Hilla and Bernd Becher’s *Industrial Façades*, a documentary art book that archives a series of black and white images of brick industrial buildings from around the world; as such, the Bechers’ text serves as a riveting work of labor history in the tradition of the documentary book. In his note, Nowak explains that the numerical “titles” atop each poem refer to a page and corresponding image in the Bechers’ text. These images, however, are not reproduced in Nowak’s volume. In fact, many of the photographed buildings in the Bechers’ text are no longer standing; thus, Nowak draws from the façades of buildings that may no longer exist, thereby underscoring the loss of industrial work in the United

States and Europe. By not re-presenting the photographs, he further highlights this absence—of buildings, of work, and of people—as well as the changing nature of labor.³⁷

Literary cultural studies scholar Paula Rabinowitz elaborates about these images:

One has access to the images of loss and emptiness only through the *words inscribed beneath a number*...to see [the photographs] the reader must become doubly occupied...in the poems and in a trip to [a] library or bookstore for the images. Twice removed from the visual source, the reader hears only fragments of collected speech, excerpts of printed text amid the *few spare descriptions of the images* and Nowak's occasional references to his own labor as poet. (46-47; emphasis added)

Many scholars, including Michael Davidson, David Ray Vance, and Paula Rabinowitz, tend to attribute the form of the poems in “\$00/Line/Steel/Train” to the classical Japanese poetic form of *haibun*, which includes a “prose passage [that] is followed by a short haiku or lyric” (Davidson 746). These scholars’ analysis stems from Nowak’s own comments found in interviews, including those with Philip Meters in the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* and another with Liz Axelrod in *12th Street: The Journal of Writing and Democracy*.

In fact, much of the scholarship on Nowak’s poetry borrows from Nowak’s own commentary on the inspiration behind his poems; as such, conversations about the documentary and aesthetic strategies at work in Nowak’s *Shut Up Shut Down* have been limited by this tendency to rely too heavily on Nowak’s remarks about his own work. In this section, I wish to build from Paula Rabinowitz’s brief comments about “\$00/Line/Steel/Train” in which she mentions the “words inscribed beneath a number” and the “few spare descriptions of the images” from *Industrial Façades*. Her passing comments offer yet another way to appreciate and engage with Nowak’s documentary process, as she alludes to the ekphrastic nature of this opening section’s poems,

verbal moments that contemplate the visual representation of the architectural edifices found in the Bechers' text. I wish to extend Rabinowitz's observation about the visual-verbal relationship presented in the first section of Nowak's *Shut Up Shut Down* by ultimately arguing that these ekphrastic poems collapse the boundaries between audience (reader/viewer) and subject (poem/photograph). In doing so, Nowak's poems reanimate the relationship between audience and subject as they provide space for willfully forgotten stories to be heard and, more importantly, *experienced* as part of a forming and formative collective, one that is grounded upon a willingness to listen. His ekphrases are thus part of his overall practice of textual solidarity.

Ekphrasis: Context and Definitions

Ekphrasis has a long history in Western poetry, as its first use as a mode of perception and composition is most often attributed to Homer's description of the shield of Achilles in the ancient Greek epic poem, the *Iliad*. The most common definition of ekphrasis rests on three fundamental principles: 1) ekphrasis is a verbal representation of a visual composition, such as a painting or sculpture; 2) the verbal representation should be composed so that the reader may truly visualize and experience the ekphrastic object, even in its absence; and 3) the verbal representation of the visual medium typically announces its awareness of its own composition. As Claire Barbetti explains in the introduction to her study on ekphrastic Medieval visions, this common definition of ekphrasis tends to create an artificial binary between the verbal and visual arts. Extending a 2006 study on ekphrastic American poetry by Barbara K. Fischer, Barbetti notes that this artificial binary stems from two dominant modes in theoretical discussions about ekphrasis: the *paragone* model, which grew from debates during the Italian Renaissance over which art form was more superior to another (and often took the form of directly pitting the

visual arts and poetry against each other); and the *ut pictura poesis* model, mostly frequently championed by Horace in his influential *Ars Poetica* in which he argues that the most skilled imaginative works (like poetry) merit as much critical study as painting, which was viewed as a superior art form for centuries. Such models of understanding ekphrastic works tend to view ekphrasis as a product that is either attempting to compete with the ekphrastic object, vying for attention and critical scrutiny, or seeking to mimetically re-present the ekphrastic object, albeit in a different mode. However, “[m]uch of ekphrasis isn’t merely description, isn’t merely mimetic in contest with the visual over which can be the most ‘real’ or ‘beautiful,’” suggests Barbetti; “in fact, much of it is reflective, conversational, inquisitive, and even at times accusatory or critical” (Barbetti 28).

Barbetti claims that traditional approaches to ekphrastic theory limit our understanding of how ekphrasis works in both Medieval visions and contemporary poetry, and my approach to the first section of Nowak’s *Shut Up Shut Down* is indebted to Barbetti’s insights into ekphrastic theory. Like Barbetti, I see ekphrasis as a *doing*, rather than a *product*, a doing that is deeply connected to memory formation and politics of composition. The use of ekphrasis in Nowak’s “\$00/Line/Steel/Train” furthers a process of reflection “about the ways humans come to apprehend the world through various codes: image, language, music, structure” (Barbetti 5). Put simply, according to Barbetti, ekphrasis is a “tool of contemplation” (10); this tool has the potential to engage with personal, individual, subjective memories and connect them to a larger context, even a collective. Popular criticism of documentary poetics often mistakenly characterizes poems like Nowak’s as mimetic due to their insistence upon incorporating quotations about historical events; however, I suggest that his documentary poetics do not solely focus on the *repetition* of memories (though they do function this way at times). Rather, I

acknowledge that memory is the “primary activity that bridges the personal and the public,” as it “operates as a filter, sorter, and builder, cementing images it constructs from experience, whether the experience is physical or intellectual in nature” (Barbetti 9). Nowak’s ekphrases, his *writings through* the Bechers’ images,³⁸ along with his sampling of worker testimony, are ultimately about the *re-figuring* of histories and information. In “\$00/Line/Steel/Train” specifically, Nowak offers an aesthetic model for countering the alienating effects of capitalism and for creating space for and compositions of collective grief, mourning, anger, and hope.

Public Contemplations: Ekphrastic Engagements in “\$00/Line/Steel/Train”

The second poem of Nowak’s “\$00/Line/Steel/Train” offers perhaps one of the clearest introductions to the central themes—including industrial labor, grief, seeing/listening, ethnocentrism, and language inculcation—and the aesthetic and rhetorical strategies at work in his poetry. The final section of poem “2.” reads:

Bricks, the frame [work]
of an eye, accents
of bricklayer
and optometrist, tongues
extant (12)

As Nowak explains in his prefatory note, the visual antecedent to the second poem of “\$00/Line/Steel/Train” is a black and white image of an industrial building located in the Netherlands (see figure 12):



Figure 12: Plate 2, Harlingen, NL 1963. Photograph by Bernd and Hilla Becher from the book *Industrial Façades* 1982. Courtesy of MIT Press, Schirmer/Mosel Verlag.

Although Nowak has not reproduced the Bechers' photo in *Shut Up Shut Down*, it is valuable to consider these two texts alongside each other to reflect upon the ekphrastic processes at work in this poem and how these ekphrases speak to workers' issues.

Juxtaposed against the Bechers' image, the poem most obviously calls attention to the materials—the “bricks”—that literally “frame” the physical structure and that were the tools of labor necessary to complete the building of this industrial site. But these final lines of poem “2.” also reflect upon two details in the photograph/on the building. First, Nowak's phrase, “accents / of bricklayer / and optometrist,” draws our attention to the ornamental circle in the top center of the building that itself is “framed” by bricks. Nowak's reference to an “optometrist” suggests that this brickwork is reminiscent of a visit to the eye doctor, as the orb with bricks emanating from the circle's edges resembles the bright light that patients are asked to focus on when their vision is being examined. Known as a “slit lamp,” this device illuminates the front of the eye to detect certain eye conditions that can curtail vision and eye health. Of course, the circular

brickwork in the photo also resembles an eye—the entrance point of vision and primary mode of information reception.

As it contemplates the Bechers' photograph, Nowak's ekphrastic poem invites us to reflect upon how our eyes "frame" what we see. Since this poem, and the opening section of poetry overall, documents the loss and emptiness of industrial towns that have fallen into disarray from the closing of factories and subsequent rise of unemployment, Nowak's ekphrases also remind us that we have a *choice* to look and to focus our attention on the conditions in front of us. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright remind us in their influential study on visual culture that "[t]o look is an act of choice. Through looking we negotiate social relationships and meanings... To willfully look or not is to exercise choice and influence" (10). In the case of *Shut Up Shut Down*, Nowak invites readers to truly see the "crisis / from the conditions" (11); to do otherwise is to embrace a condition, to choose to be near-sighted or even blind to hardships experienced by working people in once thriving industrial towns. His focus on sight is also a significant play on words, as his poems overall call attention to multiple sites/sights: the site of labor (brick work to create the building itself; the industrial work that takes place within the space of the building) and visual sight, what we see or do not see when we look at industrial spaces (the work and products of labor; the workers doing the laboring; the lack of work due to unemployment).

Unlike *Industrial Façades*, a beautifully-rendered art book that functions like a portable museum, though stored in academic libraries and specialty bookstores, Nowak's poems do not "pit subject against object, gazer against the gazed-upon" as often happens in the space of museums and even in collectible books (Barbetti 32). The governing principle of the ekphrastic moments in "\$00/Line/Steel/Train" is to "create relationships, connections" between the reading audience and the stories woven into the poems. For Nowak, part of this connection-making

process, this new way of seeing, relies also upon the reader's willingness to *listen* to voices, to the lived experiences of those affected by industrial work, and the absence of it. His description of Bechers' photograph in poem "2." signals the importance of speaking/listening as well when he writes that "tongues" are "extant." If we again view the photograph, we see that the 1963 structure features yet another set of "accents": three visible arches on the front of an otherwise plain brick structure. Such decorative design work was intended in part to emphasize or visually elongate the height of the overall building. Nowak's contemplation on these brick arches invites us to imagine them as tongues extending from several mouths. The highly visible—"extant"—tongues suggest that, even though the building itself is "shut up," the factory, and the photograph of it, still contain voices, stories that demand to be heard. And as Paula Rabinowitz has noted, "Nowak wants to hear [these] voices" (47), and hopes that his readers, too, are open to the processes of seeing and listening that are necessary to fully comprehend the crisis of industrial decline that characterized the neoliberal order of the late twentieth, early twenty-first centuries in the United States.

In Nowak's *Shut Up Shut Down*, these voices are found in the boldface lines throughout the volume. In "\$00/Line/Steel/Train" the bold lines correspond to testimony which is excerpted from multiple texts and newly assembled in the prose portions below the numerical title of each poem. We learn from the worker testimony in poem "1.," for instance, that the speaker had expressed concerns about the future of his job at a Lackawanna steel plant. Aware of the rampant closings of US steel factories in the second half of the twentieth century, the worker explains that **"it wasn't just losing a job...but your entire life, the place that you grew up in was going to be gone,"** a **"ghost town"** (Nowak, *SUSD* 11).³⁹ The testimony offers insight into insecurities and conditions beyond the reality of industrial decline, as it conveys stories of personal despair

that are clearly part of a larger, though deeply personal, public context. On one hand, the testimony alludes to the emotional consequences of unemployment. The loss of an “entire life” suggests a loss of routine, stability, and importantly, personal agency, a particularly debilitating reality for parents in working class communities whose identity is often defined in part by their ability to provide for their families. This painful personal despair, according to the American Psychological Association, leads to a “trauma of joblessness,” which may manifest as severe depression, alcohol abuse, and even suicide. In fact, a 2014 Gallup poll suggests that:

unemployed Americans are more than twice as likely as those with full-time jobs to say they currently have or are being treated for depression—12.4% vs. 5.6%, respectively. However, the depression rate among the long-term unemployed—which the Bureau of Labor Statistics defines as those who have been seeking work for 27 weeks or more—jumps to 18.0%. (Crabtree)

The poll also suggests that the mental health effects of unemployment may also lead to difficulty in maintaining future work, which further exacerbates the “trauma of joblessness.” Nowak’s documentary process, which extracts workers’ voices from multiple sources and puts them into conversation with ekphrastic poems, presents an investigative and aesthetic technique that “recognize[s] and record[s]” the stories of ordinary working people (Nowak, “Notes...” 334), while simultaneously inviting his readers to, as David Ray Vance has noted, “inquire critically into the ways capitalism ‘forms and informs’ identity” (337), which is often shaped by loss, grief, and anxiety.

The non-bolded typeface in the prose sections of “\$00/Line/Steel/Train” also contain ekphrastic reflections upon the Bechers’ photos, and the ekphrastic portions of one poem often interact with the bold testimony of another, though Nowak invites his readers to uncover this

interaction, as he prefers to stage such possibilities, inviting a kind of “drama,” as he has noted in his “Notes toward an Anti-Capitalist Poetics II” (334). The second sentence of poem “2.,” for example, reads: “Nation (Under Construction) needs the State (in decay)—a flag out of focus where working-class (white) masculinity also factors into how factories get framed” (*SUSD* 12). This passage reflects upon the vague detail of a flag in the far-left center of the photograph (see again figure 10). As A. Berger has suggested in *The Objects of Affection*, “as we grow up, [we] become imprinted with cultural codes [and] learn all kinds of associations” (18), associations that eventually become automatic. Since Nowak’s sentence first begins with the words “Nation” and “State,” when American readers arrive at the word “flag,” they likely immediately imagine an American flag, a metonymic reference to the United States. As soon as Nowak invites his readers to make this association, relying upon familiar codes typically associated with patriotism, Nowak destabilizes our comfort with this sign. The flag in question—the one mentioned in the poem and visible in the Bechers’ photograph—is “out of focus”; thus, ignoring for a moment the speaker’s parenthetical remarks, we understand the central claim of this sentence to offer a critique of and commentary on the ideological apparatus of the Nation State, metonymically represented in this line by the “flag out of focus.” And according to the poem, what this State (presumably the United States) represents is not clearly distinguishable in part because of the “framing” effects of “(white) masculinity,” which informs what happens inside the shut up factory doors.

Nowak’s poem “38.” then responds to and clarifies this comment about “(white) masculinity” as it reproduces verbatim testimony by an unnamed steelworker, whose recollections disclose the unjust and apparently common practice of furloughing Black steelworkers in the mid-twentieth century. The worker testifies: “**They put me in hot places all summer, where not many men will stay; when it gets cool they layed [sic] me off; White**

men get my job” (Nowak, *SUSD* 14). Characteristic of Nowak’s documentary practice, he invites readers to investigate his Works Cited entries to uncover the sources for his poems, including the source of this narrative in bold. In doing so, we learn that Nowak sampled from the testimony of Alvin Nunley, a Black employee at Crucible Steel Plant in Pittsburgh, PA, whose account is recorded in chapter six of Dennis Dickerson’s *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania*, which chronicles the pervasive racism in Pittsburgh steel mills, particularly during and after the second World War. The testimony continues, “[T]he **employment manager...has sent me to places in the mill where I have worked as good as any other man, but I can’t get the job steady, on account of I am not [a] White man**” (*SUSD* 14). Dickerson elaborates upon Nunley’s testimony, noting:

Although World War II restored employment opportunities to Black steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, their social and economic conditions remained very much the same. In spite of the New Deal, SWOC, and wartime prosperity, Black [Americans] continued to suffer from discriminatory hiring practices, lack of promotion, and poor living conditions. (149)

Thus, while the Pittsburgh mills did not refuse to hire African Americans in the 30s and 40s, employers still treated Black employees as second-class citizens, as seasonal “help,” despite the union presence. In fact, Nunley’s testimony was initially sent to President Roosevelt in 1938—shortly *after* Crucible Steel signed a collective bargaining agreement with the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (a precursor to the United Steelworkers).

The final lines of poem “38.” read, “The basic form (the photograph of a factory inside this frame) does not discontinue” (*SUSD* 14). If we remove the parenthetical remarks, the sentence almost feels unfinished: The basic form does not discontinue *what?* But Nowak’s sentence does

not include a direct object; instead, the “basic form” itself will not end, suggesting that something about the form is long-lasting, perhaps even eternal. However, the parenthetical remarks clarify the nature of the never-ending form, which is the “photograph of a factory” inside the poem, which Nowak refers to as a “frame.” Labeling the poem a “frame” suggests that the poem literally encloses the “photograph of a factory,” just as a picture frame might enclose or “frame” a photograph. Such framed images are often precious moments that we wish to remember. However, framing also suggests boundaries, as if something else exists beyond the limits of the frame. Thus, while poem “38.” invites us to reflect upon the photo at the core of the poem, whose image (and content) are so worthy of being framed, the poem also reminds us that more stories exist beyond the boundaries of this particular poetic frame.

The final lines of the prose portion thus invite us to consider the Bechers’ image referenced in this poem; in doing so, we see that the remaining ekphrastic lines of the poem contemplate the image and offer further commentary on the relationship between American capitalism and race. This commentary, according to the logic of the poem, is what must be framed, as the lessons learned from the photo and ekphrases of it must be remembered. The Bechers’ “photograph of a factory” again reveals a façade of an industrial building, comprised of brick and concrete with two metal doors (see figure 13). Two separate sets of railroad tracks enter/exit these doors, though one set of tracks runs into a “HALT” sign, suggesting that the loads delivered on those tracks must stop before they are permitted to enter the factory. A pole—most likely a flagpole—rises between tracks, though the top of it has been cut off from the photo’s frame:

Black and white workers, as well as the division between the working and capitalist classes. When read aloud, though, “two” sounds like “too,” meaning “also,” suggesting that the speaker wonders if America, when narrativizing its history, remembers and reflects upon the racial and class divisions that have characterized the United States for hundreds of years. The juxtaposition of prose/worker testimony and lyric/ekphrastic expression ultimately “bridge[s]...personal and...public” information, “filtering” what it needs to “cement” and frame certain memories so as to be instructive (Barbetti 9). Nowak’s frame work is thus inherently political, as the *re-figuring* of information unsettles readers from their romantic views of factory work and the “American Dream.” He demands that we consider “which bit of the totality is available, visible, in focus” and “whose interests are being served by the framing of social reality” (Hugill), both in the poem and, more importantly, in common narratives about American history with which we might be more familiar.

Poem “160.” extends Nowak’s critique of America’s racial and class divisions and the stories—or lack thereof—that we tell about these divisions. Formally, this poem stands out from the others in “\$00/Line/Steel/Train”; its visually striking line breaks, typographical emphasis, and use of footnotes generate a poetic climax and crystallization of themes within the sequence overall (see figure 14):

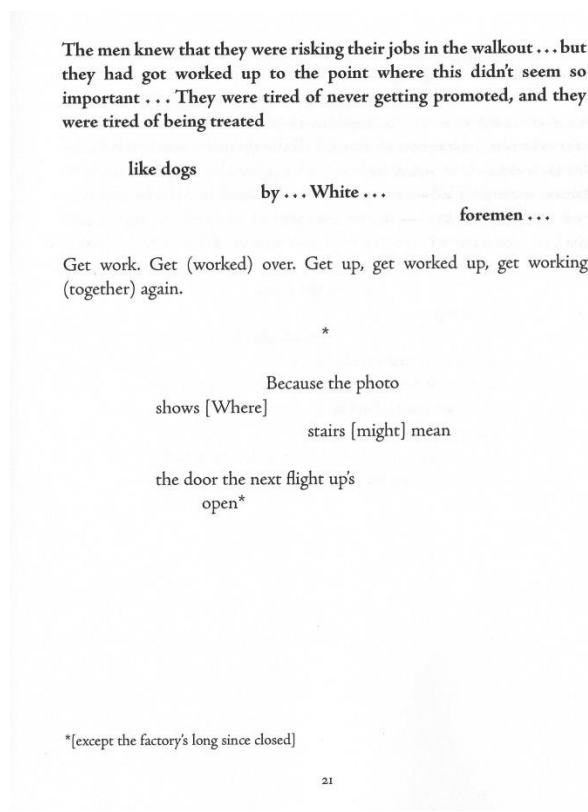


Figure 14: Nowak, Mark. Scan of Page 21 of Mark Nowak’s *Shut Up Shut Down*. 2004. *Shut Up Shut Down*, by Mark Nowak, Coffee House P, 2004, p. 21.

The opening lines in boldface again offer testimony by a steel mill worker who reflects upon a factory strike, apparently led by black mill workers. Reminiscent of Nunley’s testimony in poem “38.,” the source reveals that workers were “**tired of never getting promoted, and they were tired of being treated like dogs by...White...foremen**” (21). The line breaks surrounding this sentence’s concluding phrase highlight the words, “dogs,” “White,” and “foremen”; thus, while the linear sentence clarifies that the foremen’s treatment of the workers was inexcusable, the line breaks create a visual rhetorical effect in which the White foremen are name-called “dogs.” In a poem that depicts and reflects upon race and class divisions, this wordplay calls to mind the verbal irony at work in “the dozens,” a game of whit and insults prevalent in African American literature and music. While Black millworkers were treated “like dogs,” Nowak, in his staging of

information and words on the page, subtly shifts the insult: the racist foremen are the real “dogs.” The form of the poem thus performs two scenes at once, whereby the linear, grammatical scene linguistically masks the coded “playing of the dozens.” Only readers open to Nowak’s invitation *to listen* and *to see* will be able to catch this game of verbal wit, and he invites his readers to participate in such criticism as they read the poem, which offers a sort of formal solidarity with Black millworkers who were marginalized within their work communities. Too, since Nowak invites us to be open to his exposé, he expects that his readers will also work to discover their own solidarity actions, beyond his textual solidarity.

Immediately below the bold lines rests a series of quips, what Piers Hugill refers to as “sloganeering and teasingly lyrical commentary” in his 2005 *Jacket 2* review of *Shut Up Shut Down*. These slogans, which we might imagine on motivational posters hung around a workplace, demand that employees “**Get [to their] work**” and “**get working (together) again**” (Nowak, *SUSD* 21). As if erasing all tension and disagreements between the workers, the slogans offer directives or mandates to inform the workers of their employer’s desired outcomes. But these quips also offer states of being or states of mind, not just sloganeering: once employees “**get work,**” they “**get (worked) over**” (21), a colloquialism referring to working someone so hard that they are beat into submission. As this line further suggests, though, this state of exploitation also “**get[s] employees worked up**” so that they choose to “**get working (together) again**” (21). These lines thus suggest that the factory offers an educative experience: in repeatedly getting worked over (“they were tired of never being promoted, tired of being treated / like dogs”), employees learn who profits from their labor, and who profits from the racial divisions within the workplace. As Hugill clarifies, Nowak “attempt[s] to make the dialectical struggle between interrelated yet opposing (or apparently opposing) interests (between boss and

worker, black and white employees, the employed and the unemployed) apparent, shedding light on where class interests really lie.” The walkout thus represents possibility: for better working conditions, for job and class advancement, and for solidarity among Black and white workers.

Nowak conveys this hope through the ekphrastic lines that conclude poem “160.”

Referencing another Becher photo, the lines read:

Because the photo
shows [Where] stairs [might] mean

the door the next flight up’s
open*

These lines describe the left edge of the photo, which “shows...stairs” that lead to the “next flight up” (see figure 15):



Figure 15: Plate 160, Mines de Jarny, Lorraine, F 1985. Photograph by Bernd and Hilla Becher from the book *Industrial Façades* 1982. Courtesy of MIT Press, Schirmer/Mosel Verlag.

However, the purpose of these ekphrastic lines is not merely to describe or represent one corner of a photo; rather, this poem writes through the scene in the photograph to reflect upon the

symbolic potential of the staircase. The speaker suggests that these stairs might lead to an open door, which further represents the potential for better working conditions, stable income, a raise, even a promotion. In the Becher photograph we likewise view the top of the factory, which features circular brickwork with metal cross-shaped beams in the foreground. Nowak's line, combined with the photograph's staircase that possibly leads to open doors and a kind of visual salvation, offers hope to workers, the suggestion that a better future lies ahead.

However, the salvific potential offered in these lines is tempered by the parenthetical qualifier "might" and an asterisk that leads our eyes—as well as our hope—downward. Nowak reminds us at the bottom of the page that "the factory's long since closed" (21). This footnote clarifies that the word "might" does not suggest possibility; instead, "might" refers to a false hope of upward mobility since, in the end, industrial factories across the United States and Europe have *shut up* their doors. Even if "the door the next flight up" were open, no workers are present to ascend the staircase to pass through it. The tone of Nowak's ekphrastic engagement in poem 160. is thus both inquisitive and critical, reflecting the anger and despair that run so deeply in working-class communities that have been decimated by capitalism, its need for racial division, and the current rates of unemployment, particularly in industrial cities and towns.

Any measure of hope offered in poem 160. or the corresponding Becher photograph is likewise mitigated by the form of the conclusion to each poem in "\$00/Line/Steel/Train." Nowak has claimed that the fragmentary lines that follow the prose portions formally resemble the "effects of neoliberalism and globalization on the manufacturing sector in the States" (Davidson 746). In his visually staggering, broken, and non-linear poetic lines, Nowak attempts to "capture that fracturing, that collapse, that disintegration of industry and community and self that [he] had been a witness to in...the 'rust belt'" (Davidson 746). Paula Rabinowitz elaborates upon the

form of these ekphrastic fragments, suggesting that Nowak “locates collapse on the bottom of the page, within the poem’s text” (49).

While Nowak’s intention may have been to visually convey post-industrial collapse and rust belt recession, the act of ekphrastically conveying such disintegration actually offers a solution to the alienation and fragmentation experienced under capitalism. Rabinowitz gestures toward this idea in the final sentences of ““Between the outhouse and the garbage dump””; she notes:

Depressed under the stanza’s horizon, however, lies another space of reverie, of pain and play, visible to the page reader but otherwise inaudible. This is the poem’s edge—another kind of outhouse, another dumping ground, with the potential for free play, crossing borders and mocking through reappropriation...[*Shut Up Shut Down*] offers materials for instruction, not yet collapsed. (49)

These “materials for instruction” refer in part to the primary artistic/affective strategy at work in the opening section of Nowak’s volume: ekphrasis. The ekphrastic engagements in “\$00/Line/Steel/Train” invite readers to make connections across time and space, to reflect upon the closing of industrial factories throughout Europe and the United States. At the poem’s edge, especially in the white space that frames the poems on the page, readers are invited to participate in the free play of meaning-making so they might uncover the causal relationship between the outsourcing of labor, unemployment, racism, and a global economic system. This visible white space is, contrary to Rabinowitz’s claim, audible as well: the almost ethereal fragments invite additional pause, breath, and reflection, as they provide even more space for reverie: readers can truly get lost in the swerves generated by the white space that literally surrounds each word and punctuation mark in these ekphrastic glimpses into labor’s history and present. Forced to navigate this white space, readers must again make connections between seemingly disparate

words and phrases or between words that play upon each other in surprising ways. Nowak's ekphrastic strategies and the critical and affective work they inspire provide a discursive form of anti-capitalist resistance that demands feeling, connection, empathy, and reflection—all of which work to counter the alienating effects of capitalism. Too, his ekphrastic work in “\$00/Line/Steel/Train” collapses the boundaries between his readers and poetic/photographic subjects. In doing so, Nowak's poems reanimate the relationship between audience and subject as they provide space for stories to be heard and, more importantly, *experienced* as part of a forming and formative collective, one that is grounded upon a willingness to listen.

Part 2:

Archiving Violence and Abuse in *Shut Up Shut Down*

Another set of instructional materials that contribute to this forming collective is comprised of textual sources—in particular, the nonfictional accounts of plant closings and the testimony offered by workers who were directly impacted by unemployment and the racist practices embedded within the steel industry. This first section of *Shut Up Shut Down*, like the volume overall, thus functions as an archive of American labor history. As Hal Foster notes in “An Archival Impulse,” the archival artist “seek(s) to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present” by locating and assembling “obscure [sources] in a gesture of alternative knowledge” (3-4). In his study on Kenneth Goldsmith and Mark Nowak, Michael Leong claims that “such notions of displacement and obscurity [are] crucial to Nowak’s... project: the title of his book, *Shut Up Shut Down*, suggests that the imperiled workers he advocates are being ‘shut up’ by corporate and political interests as their livelihoods are being ‘shut down’” (para. 5). In his volume, Nowak seeks to upend the mainstream body of knowledge about labor history, as he highlights worker experiences that have been filed away in a folder long forgotten—in an archive “out of public consciousness” (Leong, para. 5; emphasis added). Leong clarifies that Nowak’s archival process “involves a re-situating of neglected information from the lower hierarchies of social memory into a counter-archive of alternative knowledge” (para. 5). In doing so, Nowak’s volume documents a collection of stories and memories, particularly about race and class relations within the steel industry, that would otherwise be archived in a file to which few people would have access.

Archival Work and Indirection: An Investigation into the Murder of Vincent Chin

Perhaps the starkest example of the complex and often violent intersection between race, gender, and class in *Shut Up Shut Down* is offered by Nowak’s poetic sequence, “June 19,

1982.” This third section of the volume chronicles yet another effect of unemployment: ethnocentrism and fears of “foreign” workers “stealing” American jobs. Similar to “\$00/Line/Steel/Train,” this third sequence interweaves elements of several documents; however, rather than ekphrastically contemplate unseen photographs in “June 19, 1982,” this sequence more directly reflects upon the psychological and social effects of unemployment as it reproduces original photographs of Detroit, Michigan taken by Nowak. In twelve parts, Nowak crafts documentary poems that first offer excerpts from Raymond Williams’s *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. In these quoted passages, Nowak (via Williams) explores—and invites readers to explore—the cultural history of labor-specific words, such as “unemploy” and “idle.” In doing so, these excerpts expose the ideological weight and effects of language. The second segment of the poems found in “June 19, 1982” includes testimony by workers. As Nowak clarifies on the Works Cited page to the poetic sequence, this testimony comes verbatim from *Shutdown at Youngstown: Public Policy for Mass Unemployment*, which used the 1977 steel mill closings in Youngstown, Ohio as a case study to analyze and define the impact of unemployment on the mill town families and former workers. As such, these narratives, which read like confessionals or excerpts from talk therapy sessions, recount workers’ suffering due to plant closings. The third and final portion of these segments samples information from the 1987 award-winning documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* Thus, this third portion provides a “documentary of a documentary” in which phrases, ideas, and reflective commentary are dramatically remixed to stage a series of lines that climax into the murder of Chinese American engineer Vincent Chin.

Poem 7. offers an illustrative example of how this constellation of voices and documents works throughout “June 19, 1982.” Poem 7. begins with excerpts from Raymond Williams’s

discussion of the words “employ” and “unemploy,” noting that, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these words were understood by the general public as referring to a “social condition,” rather than merely a defined state of being, particularly with the rise and advancement of industrial labor. After Williams’s passage notes how commonplace these words have been for over a century, Nowak quotes in bold the feelings of an unemployed mill worker from Youngstown:

I’m having difficulty in starting to do things. I seem to have given up. I’ve stopped trying because all that I do seems to end in failure. I feel as though I am paralyzed. It is as though I feel numb all over. (77)

The placement of this testimony immediately after Williams’s reflection suggests that the feelings of inadequacy and depression that stem from joblessness are also centuries-old, even if a scientific study of the psychological and sociological effects of unemployment had not been completed until the 1980s. By juxtaposing these materials, Nowak invites readers to make connections between job-loss throughout the centuries and to consider the ultimate cause of the emotional devastation that stems from unemployment.

Speaking more generally about “June 19, 1982,” the bold testimonies confess that the unemployed workers feel betrayed by everything that surrounds them, including their families. One worker does not “**trust certain members of [his] family**” (83), while another man admits that he has a “**strong desire to leave [his] home/family**” and “**feel[s] hate toward members of [his] family**” (73). Burdened with the reality that they can no longer financially support their families, these men are overwhelmed by their anger and frustration, but displace such aggression onto individuals who have little or nothing to do with their unemployment. As such, they are alienated from their loved ones, and their actions—“**I drink to forget my troubles...I drink to**

ease the pain...I must take drugs in order to feel good” (65, 71)—further alienate them from the root cause of their pain: an economic system that cares little about their well-being.

Ultimately, the workers feel impotent, without agency, and voiceless, as they are alienated from their families, from each other, and from themselves.

Nowak’s staging of documents highlights how capitalism’s need for labor (or not) contributes to such alienation and the long-term consequences of it. In the remaining segment of poem 7., for example, Nowak splices words and phrases into two-line clusters that suggest the unemployed workers—disempowered and desperate for connection—retreat into a strip club to temporarily assuage their pain and to assert their masculinity:

All Sexy Come
Nude Show See

service industries
basement laundries

“...service them
either by giving them

a lap dance
or a hand job...”

unemployment: 17%
laid pink slips off

hunger emergency
human commodities

The dead bolts
The Master Locks

discounted rocks
the windows (77)

Emblematic of a spectacle society, the social relationship between workers (unemployed factory workers and nightclub dancers) is mediated by ideas or *images* of what/who “men” and

“women” should be. Dancers are directed to ““service [customers] / either by giving them / a lap dance / or a hand job”” (Nowak 77), and the male patrons have likely come to expect such “services” as a part of a normal relationship with the dancers. This exigent “hunger” for connection, however, has reduced women to “human commodities” (77); as such, this relationship more closely resembles a mechanized form of exchange where no meaningful connection is made. The intimate setting is reified, and the workers remain alienated from real human connection. Importantly, the focal point of this poem, as Michael Davison notes, is a “reference to an unemployment rate of 17%,” which is then “flanked by allusions to pink slips, strip club signage, factory lockouts, and sex work” (748). Echoing Williams’s claim at the beginning of poem 7., Davidson rightly concludes that “[u]nemployment ceases to be a story of personal loss (or lack of initiative) and more of a social process that affects everyone” (748), men and women, within a collapsed industrial community.

But the staging of photographs within “June 19, 1982” also suggests that the social process of unemployment resonates with workers across time and space. Juxtaposed against poem 7. is an original photograph taken by Nowak (see figure 16):



Figure 16: Nowak, Mark. Photograph of Building with Broken Windows and “Detroit 2002.” 2004. *Shut Up Shut Down*, by Mark Nowak, Coffee House P, 2004, p. 76.

Like nearly all photos in this sequence, readers view a façade of a now-abandoned building, and this particular image is characterized by a bolted and barred metal door, broken windows, and overgrown weeds. Graffitied on the concrete, as if memorializing this empty, dilapidated structure’s moment in time, is the tag, “Detroit 2002,” which grounds readers in another city and state along the Rust Belt region. As such, Nowak’s documentary project reminds us that factory closings and the insidious effects of unemployment have extended beyond Youngstown, and into the twenty-first century.

This image also prepares readers to approach the final segment of poem 7., which mixes quotations from the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* with Nowak’s own ekphrastic reflections upon the photographs that precede the poems. Without the photo or reference list at the end of “June 19, 1982,” the “pink slips” mentioned in the poem might only seem to refer to garments worn by night club dancers and the lay-off slips delivered to the Youngstown workers whose testimony we have been reading. However, Nowak’s photo selection and his list of

sources on his Works Cited page suggest that the pink slips likewise allude to the lay-offs of Detroit-based auto workers who were at the center of Vincent Chin's murder in 1982. Gavin Goodwin affirms that "June 19, 1982" "interrogates how certain economic contexts provided fertile social and psychological grounds for such destructive emotions and lethally violent behavior to emerge" (112), as in the murder of Chin. Davidson further clarifies this economic context noting that, in 1982, Chin:

...had been attending his bachelor party at a local strip club when he got into an altercation with two men who mistook Chin – who is Chinese-American – for Japanese: "It's because of you little motherfuckers that we're out of work," witnesses remember them saying. Chin...was later accosted in front of a fast food restaurant, where the two men beat him with a baseball bat. He died of his wounds four days later. (747)

Like many of the 5,000 Youngstown workers who suffered from auto plant closings in the late 1970s, these Detroit-based auto workers misdirected their anger and frustration, "killing...an Asian-American man over the presumed loss of US jobs to Japanese companies" (747).

Since it is preceded by Williams's excerpts and the Youngstown workers' testimony, however, Nowak's poem invites readers to consider if Chin's murder, while racially motivated, ultimately stems from a larger, more sinister system that thrives on the divisions between workers. The bottom "frame" that surrounds Nowak's poetic retelling of Chin's murder in poem 7. features four ekphrastic lines, which seem to hold capitalism and its agents accountable for workers' suffering. These final lines begin by referencing the photograph on the previous page, which is visible to readers as they scan the poem. Nowak calls our attention to "the dead bolts" on the right side of the image to remind readers that this once-thriving center of industrial work has been completely "shut up" now that the factory has been "shut down." Again reminding

readers that factory-closings are ubiquitous across time and geographical area, he references “Master Locks,” a company that claims on its website to be the “largest global manufacturer and marketer of padlocks” since 1921 and boasts of its “shackles [that] are manufactured with materials that withstand harsh environments...and provide the required strength to stand up to considerable force.” The company prides itself in its global mission to help owners keep certain people inside or outside of buildings, and of course the “Master” ultimately chooses who will receive a space inside the factory. Too, the names of the component parts of the company’s primary product, as well as the general description of the product, elicit images of division, servitude, and criminality: “locks,” “shackles,” “harsh environments,” “force.” Since the overall poem draws connections between the victimization of unemployed workers and Vincent Chin, Nowak’s ekphrastic engagement ultimately indicts the system, the “Master,” that produces the need for such equipment to keep people in or out, shut up or shut down. The anger of the unemployed auto (and mill) workers, visually represented in the photograph by the windows which have been shattered by thrown rocks, is largely “discounted” by the overall system. In the end, the capitalist Master cares little about adult entertainment dancers, the unemployed steel mill and auto workers, and the murdered engineer, Vincent Chin. The racial and gendered divisions between workers—constructed by the Master to alienate workers from each other—are thus part of the capitalist system’s overarching strategy to move its businesses forward regardless of the collateral damage inflicted along the way.

Nowak’s redirected language, his carefully remixed excerpts from multiple sources, requires his audience to think critically about the ways in which capitalism and pervasive unemployment form workers’ identities and inform their decisions. Importantly, Nowak engages in this didacticism indirectly, without being prescriptive. Bill Nichols’s commentary on the

documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* could—barring a few minor edits—accurately describe Nowak’s nonprescriptive documentary praxis. Nichols notes that the documentary film upon which “June 19, 1982” is based “begins with an embedded, implicit explanation of what caused a specific murder” (Nichols, “Historical...” 61); however, like Nowak’s volume, this explanation is “built from a welter of fragments, a panoply of images and voices drawn from a wide range of sources... There is no voice-over to orient us” (61). Like this documentary film, *Shut Up Shut Down* offers various perspectives on and insight into unemployment via fragments of carefully placed information with no editorial remarks. No “voice-of-God” narrator guides readers; instead, Nowak stages an experience that takes readers on an emotional and intellectual journey, trusting our ability and desire to explore the narrative frames of unemployment, community violence, and mental health crises. Just as *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* searches for an “historical frame greater than a strict sequence of events with their presumably inexorable causality” (Nichols, “Historical...” 62), Nowak’s praxis acknowledges workers’ suffering under capitalism without falling into the fatalist trap of assuming that xenophobia and racial violence are inevitable in working-class communities. He does this in part by staging his materials so readers identify both with the unemployed workers *and* with Vincent Chin. The volume implicitly asks the revolutionary question, “Which side are you on?,” which has been a rallying cry for union workers since Florence Reece popularized it in song lyrics in the 1930s. After reflecting upon “June 19, 1982,” readers are likely inspired to be *on the side of* the working class, which includes the unemployed auto and steel mill workers whose confessional testimony is highlighted on nearly every page of the sequence. But taking this side, from Nowak’s perspective, means that we must also commit ourselves to an anti-racist, anti-xenophobic struggle so that artificial divisions between working people are no longer barriers to class unity. Readers of Nowak’s

volume are invited—encouraged, even—to indict the overall system that profits from the extensive suffering of workers.

Part 3:

Polyphonic Testimony and Parataxis in Nowak's "Capitalization"

Throughout his published work Nowak maintains a clear anti-capitalist point of view; he also unapologetically admits that he writes with an audience in mind. In an interview with Philip Metres, Nowak states:

During the process of assembling *Shut Up Shut Down*, I consciously attempted to construct a new audience, a new social space, for the potential reception of my work and other new works that might emerge in this vein. Before the book was published, the premiere of the verse play “Francine Michalek Drives Bread,” about a Taystee bakery truck driver whose husband is killed in a mining accident and who takes a more activist role in her Teamsters local, premiered at UAW Local 879 union hall across the street from the Ford plant in St. Paul. The audience, uniquely, was split half-and-half between people from the literary community (and those split evenly among poetry and theater people) and workers from the Ford plant along with activists from various unions. (14)

He goes on to explain that different sequences in *Shut Up Shut Down* were reviewed in both literary and labor journals, signaling his success at reaching a broad audience with a strong worker base. Too, his attention to the diversity of his non-traditional audience is notable: among the literary community were those interested in poetry and theater, signaling the multi-generic approach to Nowak’s work in general, but particularly in *Shut Up Shut Down*. In particular, Nowak’s attention to the “theater people” in his audience is likely a testament to his own poetics in which he challenges his own position as “author” or “poet.” According to John Beverley in *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*, the “function” and “textual presence” of *the author* has been central to “all major forms of bourgeois writing since the Renaissance” (35). However, rather than focusing on his control of language or emotion as a solitary author, Nowak intentionally alters his own function with his transition from *author* to *compiler* (we might also

say *documenter* or *archivist*). Nowak's writing—both his process and his product—must be understood as a social practice in which he actively engages and assembles various voices to investigate, expose, critique, and challenge capitalism and its effects on workers. To achieve this writing-as-social-practice, he rids his poetry of the first-person singular in favor of the first-person plural, which he again attributes to Beverley's writings on "polyphonic testimonio."

In *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*, Beverley explains that testimonio is a specific narrative mode in which readers are asked to respect a narrator as a truth-speaker. However, rather than sharing truths about one's individual experiences, the speaker of testimonio is representative of a larger social "predicament" and often "speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group" (33). Beverley explains that testimonio differs from narration in both picaresque novels and epics—two literary forms that feature a speaker who narrates a particular tale. In the picaresque novel, the narrative "I" is positioned against society at large and often assumes the role of a self-made man, albeit one who is still separate from the larger society; in the classical epic, the speaker's insights often come from his hierarchical and patriarchal status. In contrast to the narrative voice in the picaresque novel and the classical epic, according to Beverley, "tesimonio [is] a nonfictional, popular-democratic form of epic narrative" that values and affirms the "everyday" life of the speaker (33). Testimonio is a more democratic form because it "implies that any life so narrated can have a kind of representational value, [and] each individual testimonio evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences" (Beverley 34). The speaker of testimonio is intimately connected to a larger social order; even if her individual experiences differ from other members of society, her experiences and insights can speak to and for others as well. Throughout *Shut Up Shut Down* Nowak builds from this notion of an "absent polyphony of other voices" and crafts poetic sequences that

juxtapose testimonio from an array of voices. The polyphony is thus distinctly present—visible and audible—in Nowak’s writing, and leads to what he refers to as his use of the first-person plural.⁴⁰ The primary poetic strategy that Nowak uses to embrace this first-person plural, to achieve this polyphonic testimonio, is parataxis.

Like ekphrasis, parataxis invites connections and reflections upon the personal and the political, the individual and the collective, while demanding that certain words, phrases, or images interact with or meditate upon each other. Ilya Kukulin, scholar of contemporary Russian poetry, is instructive in his thinking about the nature of parataxis in documentary poetry. In his essay, “Documentalist Strategies in Contemporary Russian Poetry,” Kukulin claims that contemporary documentary texts (what he refers to as “documentalist”) are typically based on the “collision of facts belonging to different orders and of initially unrelated images and psychological states” (585). Drawing from the work of Jacques Rancière, Kukulin suggests that montage is the “syntax” of parataxis, which prompts him to adopt the useful phrase “paratactic montage” to refer not just to the collision of *words* with no stated grammatical connectors, but also to “chain[s] of *images* that are either paradoxical in themselves or made to appear strange by their collision” (Kukulin 585; emphasis added).

Nowak’s title contains perhaps the most obvious example of parataxis—of a collision of words and images—in the volume, as the juxtaposition of “shut up” and “shut down” renders a number of possible meanings. On one hand, these might be imperative statements in which someone orders individuals to shut up, as in to stop speaking or to board up windows and doors of a building. This, of course, calls to mind the ekphrastic fragment in poem 2. of “\$00/Line/Steel/Train,” which describes the tall arches of the Bechers’ photograph as “tongues extant,” a reminder that voices are waiting to be heard even as they are directed to “shut up.”

“Shut Down” might refer to the process of turning off a machine or closing up a factory, but also to the psychological and physical process of withdrawing when we are emotionally distressed. “Shut down” is thus not just a directive for workers but a state of being as well. On the other hand, the title of the book might also allude to several if/then statements: *if you don’t shut up, then I will shut you down; if you do shut up, then we will shut down*. Regardless of the grammatical function of the group of words and images in the volume’s title, *Shut Up Shut Down* asserts a set of relationship between psychology, emotions, the body, speech, and economic realities.

In varying ways, the poetic sequences within *Shut Up Shut Down* assert such relationships through paratactic montage, which in turns advances Nowak’s poetics of the first-person plural. Perhaps the best illustration is found in the second and most well-known sequence of the volume—“Capitalization.” Like all sequences in this volume, “Capitalization” is composed of textual samples and a bibliography of works cited follows the sequence. David Rae Vance suggests in his “Radical Documentary Praxis [Redux]” that these textual samples are best understood as “documentary frames” (340), since a reader’s eye and mind must make connections between the enjambed samples, much like a viewer must make sense of the frames of a cinecamera. However, the poetry-as-cinema (or parataxis-as-montage) metaphor works best when understood in terms of documentary film where the cinematic frames are literally comprised of information from different sources, with a variety of voices, perspectives, and images on each frame. In much documentary film, viewers must engage in analysis and interpretation as they make sense of the frames’ juxtaposition; this is also true for the audience’s experience in reading Nowak’s “Capitalization.”

“Capitalization” includes three main types of frames, what Gavin Goodwin refers to as *threads*; Goodwin explains that:

[t]he italicized...thread concerns Ronald Reagan’s breaking of the 1981 Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike by the firing and imprisoning of those who took part. A second thread, in bold type, is an oral history of Depression-era unionism at the Westinghouse Plant in Pittsburgh (provided by Margaret Stasik, a worker at the plant). The third thread is constructed from excerpts from Margaret Shertzer’s *The Elements of Grammar* (1986) on the use of capitalization. (103-104)

While audiences viewing film are usually able to seamlessly piece together frames of images, readers of Nowak’s “Capitalization” might need time to adjust to the montage of textual sampling in the sequence, which begins with a quote from Shertzer’s grammar book, espousing rules about capitalization:

Capitalize the first word
of every sentence, whether or not
it is a complete sentence.
Capitalize the first word of every line
of poetry. (*SUSD* 33)

The next frame or montaged thread is highlighted in boldface type and begins in the middle of the last line of the excerpted grammar book:

Capitalize the first word
of every sentence, whether or not
it is a complete sentence.
Capitalize the first word of every line
of poetry. **I started work
on an assembly line
at the huge Westinghouse plant
in East Pittsburgh when I was sixteen.
The work was dull and repetitive.** (*SUSD* 33)

The shift from the imperative sentences of the grammar book to the narrative testimonial from Stasik’s oral history might initially jar a reader’s eyes and ears since the juxtaposition of textual samples, font type, and narrative point of view initially seems to be incongruous. This incongruity is heightened by the final thread or frame in the text, noted by italics:

Capitalize the first word
of every sentence, whether or not
it is a complete sentence.
Capitalize the first word of every line
of poetry. **I started work
on an assembly line
at the huge Westinghouse plant
in East Pittsburgh when I was sixteen.
The work was dull and repetitive.**
*From 1954 to 1962,
Ronald Reagan served as host
of the television program, “G.E. Theater.” (SUSD 33)*

However, it is just this incongruity—this paratactic montage—of excerpts from a grammar book, oral history about union work, and news reports about Reagan’s breaking of the PATCO strike that deepens the poetic sequence overall. Kukulin notes that “such paratactic montage plays an important role [in documentalist/ documentary poetry], revealing discontinuities and unexpected commonalities within the usual semantic order of the world” (Kukulin 586).

As “Capitalization” progresses, the information presented in one frame both forms and informs the material in the next so that readers can experience a layered narrative that grows from seemingly disparate sources. Toward the beginning of the sequence, for instance, we learn that the speaker of the bold lines was shocked by the number of layoffs of electrical workers at the Westinghouse plant in Pittsburgh, PA when the stock market crashed in 1929. She explains that, “[i]n spite of those tough times, / there was a feeling of solidarity. If a family was put out of their house, / people would gather there to stop the eviction” (Nowak, *SUSD* 36).

Immediately following her testimony is information about Ronald Reagan’s television hosting

days at General Electric during the mid-twentieth century: “*It was Reagan who ended each show / with the famous slogan, / ‘Here at General Electric, / progress is our most important product’*” (Nowak, *SUSD* 36). The irony of this juxtaposition is fairly obvious: just a few decades after hundreds of workers lost their jobs at Westinghouse and union organizing was effectively eradicated at the plant, Reagan emphasizes on national television that “progress” is most important at G.E. This sequence in “Capitalization” clarifies what such “progress” has looked like: unemployed workers lost their gas and electricity (the very products they worked to supply at Westinghouse), and at times, their homes. The sequence cuts to excerpts from *Elements of Grammar* with rules about capitalization: “Capitalize all Government titles / when referring to definite persons / in high positions or to their positions, / and all titles of honor or nobility / when referring to specific persons” (Nowak, *SUSD* 36). But Nowak’s sequence of colliding textual samples reveals that people in “high positions” were directly responsible for the layoffs at Westinghouse, and the unemployed workers (a title that would not be capitalized in the rule book) were the individuals who nobly banded together to “turn [the utilities] back on” and to fight for powdered milk and beans for hungry families (36).

The irony of Reagan’s television hosting mantra about progress begins to climax toward the middle of “Capitalization.” As the grammar rules increase, reminding readers to demonstrate respect for inanimate objects by capitalizing the “names and synonyms / for flags of nations” (Nowak, *SUSD* 57), we learn that union organizers at Westinghouse were ostracized from their factories during the McCarthy era. We also discover that Reagan, now President of the United States within the narrative, has cited the Taft-Hartley Act⁴¹ to fire all striking air traffic controllers who demanded better working conditions and a shorter work week in 1981. In breaking the PATCO strike, Reagan incited anti-union sentiment throughout the country and

clarified that the federal government will unapologetically step in to defeat a strike if it sees fit to do so. His rationale for breaking the strike—that the controllers were in violation of their oath not to strike against the federal government—demonstrates the Administration’s allegiance to capital, to the kind of “progress” that Reagan spoke of when he hosted a TV show thirty years earlier. In the name of progress (capital, profits), Reagan disregarded the first amendment of the Constitution, intervened in a union strike, cost thousands of workers their jobs, and gained public popularity in the process. As one reporter noted after the breaking of the PATCO strike: “*The immediate impact of the denouement / of the controllers’ strike has been / to enhance Mr. Reagan’s prestige*” (Nowak, *SUSD* 57); however, as another sampled report suggests, “*The long-term implication is that / the controllers’ defeat could hasten / America’s drift towards / an almost union-free society*” (58). Overall, “Capitalization” exposes mainstream American public’s allegiance to grand narratives about democracy, represented by their insistence upon linguistic signs of respect for government titles and national symbols. However, Margaret Stasik’s oral history calls this blind allegiance into question. Via Nowak’s staging of her testimony, we wonder: if workers need unions to struggle for better conditions, and if the federal government has the license to interfere with union activities to the detriment of American workers, then shouldn’t we challenge the governing rules?

Nowak’s “Capitalization” is itself a challenge to the rule of capital/capitalization. From the outset we know his poetry will not follow the prescriptive remarks in *Elements of Grammar*, as he refuses to “[c]apitalize the first word of every line / of poetry” (*SUSD* 33). Indeed, the only obvious visual poetic indicator in “Capitalization” is his use of line breaks: the poetic sequence reads more like a play, with the different “parts” staged on the page. The play-like qualities of *Shut Up Shut Down*, however, place this book in a similar tradition as Llewellyn’s *Fragments*

from the Fire. Like Llewellyn's text, *Shut Up Shut Down* evokes and inspires a community through its poetics. Nowak's primary method to construct such a community is his insistence upon the first-person plural, or his search for the "we" inside each "I" in the testimony he records. In fact, Nowak has explained that he often uses "Capitalization" in his creative writing workshops "as a platform from which 'to start thinking about collaborative verse plays that the workers write and perform together'" (qtd. in Goodwin 113). Gavin Goodwin explains Nowak's process and elaborates upon its significance:

Each stanza is written and performed by a different worker and in performance the whole group voices the refrain collectively. These workshops and performances provide a space wherein workers can creatively express and interrogate what they think and feel about the work they do. But these imaginative activities also allow workers 'to envision a new narrative' beyond the economic and ontological restrictions of neoliberalism. For Nowak it is this first-person plural approach, in his own compositions and in those he facilitates for others, that is key to liberating workers and writers alike from the hold of a neoliberal individualist consciousness. (113)

The "neoliberal individualistic consciousness" that Goodwin mentions refers to the ideological preference—deeply rooted in American libertarian culture from its inception—for the "I," rather than the "we," especially in matters of economics. Nowak's praxis de-privileges the neoliberal "I" and instead favors a collective process of information gathering and of voicing the causes and effects of economic crisis. Thus, the "character" of Ronald Reagan in "Capitalization" is not a solitary perpetrator or the embodiment of evil as he interferes in worker-based collective action; rather, Reagan is the face and voice of the Capitol/of capital. He is an agent of an enterprise that seeks profit-making at the expense of working people.

Similarly, though, Margaret Stasik’s testimony is not only hers (though it does document her experience). Stasik’s recollections of being red-baited to the detriment of union activity at U.E. speaks to a grander narrative about labor history: in her words:

**as the benefits we [the electrical workers] gained grew,
those of us in the forefront
became targets of red-baiting**

...

**The only thing they had to throw at us
was that we were “Communists.”** (Nowak, *SUSD* 47)

Stasik notes in her reflections that her experience was shared by all others “in the forefront” of the organizing. The vanguard, a collection of individuals who are part of an even larger collective, has historically been viewed by mainstream America and its government as a threat to “democracy,” though Nowak’s sequence suggests that the government’s definition of “democracy” is actual profit-making according to a neoliberal agenda. The tenth scene in “Capitalization” clarifies this agenda. In the 1930s, as union activity gained strength, the press and churches were among the apparatuses that worked together to red-bait union leaders, creating public hysteria over the fear of Communists interfering with old-fashioned American values. In 1938, this hysteria culminated in the House Un-American Activities Committee, which offered political power to officials who sought to weaken the labor movement. The ideological and political power of such red-baiting completely ostracized labor leaders from their work and stripped the union of its radical, worker-centered core; for Margaret Stasik, this meant she was banished to a farm in Vermont selling eggs. Her personal narrative, however, metonymically offers insight into 1930s labor history in the United States.

Nowak’s layering of samples from news reports about the PATCO strike and excerpts from the grammar text deepen the implications of red-baiting in the 1930s and add to the collective “we” inside Stasik’s narrative, her *testimonio*. After Stasik’s recounting of Fr. Charles Owen

Rice's betrayal of the left-wing of the 1930s labor movement,⁴² Nowak samples the following passages:

*While the notices were being put in the mail,
striking controllers and their families
met across the nation for rallies
sometimes interrupted by federal marshals
seeking to serve union leaders and members
with court orders against the strike.*

**You had Congressman McDowell
of the *Wilkesburg Gazette*,
a little tabloid that carried articles,
shouting "Red!" every week.**

Capitalize points of the compass when
they designate geographical parts of the country.
The South has increased its manufacturers. (*SUSD* 49)

Stasik's recollections in bold suggest that the radical union activity at Westinghouse took place near two prominent Pittsburgh figures of the 1930s and 40s. Indeed, as Ronald W. Shatz notes in his *History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923-1960*, "the Westinghouse plant was [actually] located in the home district" of several individuals with "a powerful interest in defeating the UE: Father Charles Owen Rice, the guiding force behind the Pittsburgh Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, and Congressman John McDowell, a member of the House Committee on Un-American Activities" (188). The combination of a (conservative) labor unionist red-baiting more progressive labor leaders and a Republican political official—who also published a local newspaper in the Pittsburgh area—contributed to an ideology of fear and distrust in radical unionism that reached ordinary citizens in the pews on Sunday and on their porch stoops throughout the week. According to Nowak's splicing of different texts in "Capitalization," the hegemonic force of anti-communist sentiment and slander in the 1930s and 40s comes to its logical and terrifying conclusion in the 1980s when the federal government militantly intervened in the PATCO strike. Although initially incongruous, the paratactic

juxtaposition of texts actually highlights the relationship between the union-breaking in the early and late twentieth century. Although ideological apparatuses contributed to the breaking of the union at Westinghouse, repressive apparatuses intervened in the Air-Traffic Controllers' strike activity, as it was "*sometimes interrupted by federal marshals / seeking to serve union leaders and members / with court orders against the strike.*" Even Nowak's end-stopped lines heighten our suspense, as readers unfamiliar with the PATCO strike might initially expect the federal marshals to "serve [aid or assist] union leaders." As we move to the final italicized line in this particular passage, however, an additional phrase follows "to serve": the marshals, in fact, interrupted strike activity "to serve...court orders." The marshals, vested with federal power, thus carried out the wishes of the Capitol and Capitalism: to return the airlines to business as usual as quickly as possible.

But the final juxtaposed passage in this section is particularly jarring, as it refers to a "compass" and, it seems, to geography. Readers might be confused by this textual sample, which clarifies the grammatical rule about capitalizing "north," "south," "east," and "west" when they refer to "geographical parts of the country." However, the final line of poem 10., which Nowak emphasizes as one complete sentence, crystallizes both this passage's purpose in the poem *and* the effect of union-busting; the final line simply reads: "The South has increased its manufacturers." Nowak's staging of documents suggests that the weakening of union activity in the North ultimately leads to "runaway shops," the moving of labor to a part of the country (or world) in which labor standards are significantly lower and union activity is almost nonexistent (in this case, the southern part of the United States, something that was prevalent in the garment industry in the twentieth century as well). Importantly, Nowak's paratactic staging of documents, including Stasik's testimony, speaks for and about two significant communities. First, this

sequence overall addresses the real, material effects of red-baiting on the left-wing faction of labor unions. It also speaks to the effects of anti-union sentiment on the working class overall. Margaret Stasik's "*P*" therefore contains *many*, as her voice—flanked by excerpts from 1980s newspapers and a grammar textbook—speaks for the majority of working people in the United States. Poem 10., and "Capitalization" overall, clearly illustrates how Nowak paratactically stages documents to resurrect a history of working-class struggle; his insistence upon the first-person plural further suggests that remembering this history *as* a collective and *for* a collective counters the neoliberal ideology that privileges individualism over communal concerns. Nowak thus practices solidarity at the level of the text, and he invites his readers to extend such solidarity action off the page as well. His project reminds readers that collective remembering, reading, writing, and action are necessary to build a future in which working people's needs and rights are acknowledged, a future in which economic justice for all is the cultural norm and expectation, not just a mere slogan.

Part 4:

Paratactic Montage and Internationalist Textual Solidarity in *Coal Mountain Elementary*

The poetic and rhetorical processes at work in *Shut Up Shut Down* invite readers to be open to an indictment—or at the very least, a critique—of capitalism as a system that both fabricates and exploits divisions between workers. These processes comprise Nowak’s “materials for instruction,” and in the next section I consider how Nowak’s anti-racist, internationalist critique of capitalism plays out in his 2009 *Coal Mountain Elementary*, which simultaneously localizes and globalizes the conversation begun in *Shut Up Shut Down* as it reveals that that the process of globalization has also negatively impacted workers outside the United States.

To develop this poetic labor history documentary, Nowak collaborated with photographer Ian Teh, and the book includes Teh’s photographs, which are set in China, while Nowak’s photographs are from West Virginia. Overall, *Coal Mountain Elementary* explores the material and psycho-social impact of the Sago Mine Explosion that killed twelve West Virginian miners in 2006 as it allows prose poems to unfold from verbatim testimony recorded by the West Virginia Office of Miners’ Health and Safety in the days and months following the Sago disaster. Like many poems in *Fragments from the Fire* and *Shut Up Shut Down*, *Coal Mountain Elementary* makes use of appropriation as its dominant rhetorical and mode. Too, Nowak’s prose poems sample from surprising sources: the West Virginia Office of Miners’ Health and Safety website, lesson plans from the American Coal Foundation’s website, and over three dozen news articles that report on deadly mining disasters in China. Nowak organizes his book into three parts and introduces each with elementary school lesson plans about “cookie mining.” Elements of these formal lessons are then woven throughout the book, highlighting the “costs associated with mining coal” (Nowak, *CME* 87). Since the written text on the pages comes verbatim from his sources, the imaginative work of the book rests in Nowak’s assemblage of the materials and

in his listening for and perception of socially significant utterances. Marjorie Perloff would place such prose poems in the tradition of “poetry by other means” (Perloff xii).

In his 2011 article, “In Other Words: Postmillennial Poetry and Redirected Language,” Brian M. Reed chronicles contemporary books of poetry that rely upon such “other means,” what Reed refers to as “redirected language,” or language that “appropriate[es] others’ words, redacting them, and presenting them as their own” (759). According to Reed, poets who incorporate such redirected language “reward, even require, seeking out and scrutinizing other texts. Above all, they tend to downplay self-expression in favor of documentation, especially of the demotic, vernacular, and popular” (759). In his survey, Reed briefly mentions Nowak’s *Coal Mountain Elementary*, which he rightly refers to as “an anticapitalist *muckraking poem* in the tradition of Muriel Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead*” (775). Without closely analyzing the text, Reed suggests that *Coal Mountain Elementary*’s primary documentary mode is such redirection, the copying and re-representing of others’ words to construct an account of mining disasters in the United States and China in the twenty-first century. Reed correctly suggests that redirection “inclines such poems toward a pronounced self-reflexivity. They meditate on what the language deployed in a particular situation, genre, or text renders possible or impossible to say” (775-776). However, contrary to Reed’s definition of “redirected language,” Nowak never attempts to present this language “as [his] own,” (759), as one of the distinguishing features of Nowak’s documentary praxis is his persistent *documentation* of his sources.

Nevertheless, Reed’s definition offers a vocabulary to discuss one aspect of Nowak’s *Coal Mountain Elementary*, particularly Reed’s use of the word “meditate,” which suggests that the process of redirecting language involves time, listening, and reflection—both before and after the construction of the poems. This meditative act calls to mind Barbetti’s discussion of ekphrasis in

which she argues that ekphrasis is a “tool of contemplation” that has the potential to engage with personal, individual, subjective memories and connect them to a larger context (Barbetti 10).

While ekphrasis refers to a manner of meditative description and composition, though, parataxis typically refers to a *style* of diction. Thus, paratactic sentence structures might be woven into the ekphrastic poem; or, ekphrastic descriptions might be achieved vis-a-vie paratactic phrases.

Sometimes referred to as “poetic indicators,” ekphrasis and parataxis are not always concomitant strategies of composition in documentary poetry. In Nowak’s *Shut Up Shut Down*, the two strategies often go hand-in-hand, and they work together to achieve a relational poetics that typically characterizes social documentary poetry. *Coal Mountain Elementary*, however, relies more heavily on parataxis in both its form and meditative strategy. In *Coal Mountain*, Nowak’s archival work is essentially paratactic and more fully embraces the first-person plural than does *Shut Up Shut Down*. Through this paratactic archival work and commitment to polyphony, Nowak’s *Coal Mountain Elementary* advocates for transnational worker solidarity as it more fully develops an internationalist critique of capitalism.

In his 2010 interview with Philip Metres, Nowak chronicles his motivation for writing and method of producing *Coal Mountain Elementary*. He clarifies that *Coal Mountain* was intentionally designed to spend more time between each documentary frame, so that the quick jumps between documents in “Capitalization,” for example, are nonexistent in the later book. In the Metres interview, Nowak suggests that the form of *Coal Mountain* may have mirrored the larger global and economic context. Nowak suggests:

Perhaps there is also something to the fact that *Shut Up*...was composed and published in a time of neoliberal economic frenzy while *Coal Mountain* is a book about crisis that was composed and published during a ferociously slowed global economy/economic crisis.

[*CME* is] a book of tremendous loss published during a period of drastic losses in employment, manufacturing jobs, and the historical gains of the post-WWII working classes. (16)

Published in 2009, a year into the recession that impacted the global economy and devastated communities throughout the world, *Coal Mountain* meditates on—and demands its readers reflect upon—the “death[s] of 15,000 coal miners in a three-year period in China...and this utterly devastating, heart-wrenching story at the Sago mine in West Virginia” (Metres and Nowak 15). Nowak elaborates that the “speed...of the montage, of the jump cuts, in *Shut Up* felt too quick...particularly given the nature of the stories in *CME*” (Metres and Nowak 15).⁴³

The slowed speed of the frames in *Coal Mountain* is apparent from the first pages. Even a quick glance at these initial pages suggests that readers must spend time digesting information, which is formatted in justified block-like prose poems. While the analogy between Nowak’s poems and film (both in the sense of movies and pre-digitized photographic negatives/positives) is a bit overdone at this point (Nowak himself speaks of his poetic practice in terms of documentary film-making), it is worth commenting on the visual analogy between the poems on the page and film frames (see figure 17):

A 40-year-old woman has been waiting in a small room about 50 metres from the mouth of the Sunjiawan colliery since Monday afternoon's underground explosion. Compared to other distraught relatives clustered in the meeting room, where miners usually gather before descending into "the hole," the 40-year-old looked rather calm, a witness said. As a miner's wife, she said she had prepared herself for this day, but still it came too soon. "We didn't have the traditional new year lunch together because he had to work," she said. "His only day off for the whole year was (Lunar) New Year's Eve. We cooked dumplings. It was a good time." Her husband had been eager to get back to the hole, his wife said, "because he could get double pay on New Year's Day." She said she was not particularly sad but feared the scene when the dead would be brought to the surface and laid out in cold rows on the ground, awaiting identification. "I have no language for my feelings," she said. "And there's no way anybody else can understand it."

And that morning I just — I did actually notice though and I made the comment of an old wive's tale, you know, what does this mean, this lightning and thunder in January because where I'm from there's always a — you know, the frogs in certain part of the year and things like that. But I went to the door and opened the door because it was lightning and thunder carrying on so bad and it was so warm for the second day of January. You know, I asked two or three people, you know, what could this mean, you know. I mean, there's got to be a tale of some sort, you know.

Figure 17: Nowak, Mark. Scan of Pages 2-3 of Mark Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary*. 2009. *Coal Mountain Elementary*, by Mark Nowak, Coffee House P, 2009, pp. 2-3.

The overall visual form of these block poems resembles both film negatives and film positives alike, drawing a direct correlation between photographic images and Nowak's documentary poems, which on these pages are comprised entirely of news reports and worker testimony. This analogy can be extended further, however. Pre-digital photographs required rolls of film to capture and produce images on paper. In these film negatives, the darkest portions of the captured images appeared light, almost ghostly, while the lightest portions of the images appeared significantly darker, offering stark contrast between light and dark features on the negative itself. However, film positives, which produced transparencies and slides, yielded the opposite effect: the lightest portion of the photographed subject, such as the sky in the background, appeared light, and the darkest portion appeared dark. The prose poems in Nowak's

volume resemble these film positives in the form of slides: the darkest portion of the documented material—the stories of horrific mining disasters—appear in dark black font, whereas the background—the blank page—appears light.

The metaphorical relationship between the poem/its content and the photographic process suggests first, and most basically, that the stories of coal mining disasters in the U.S. and China are worthy of documentary status, and Nowak’s volume certainly functions as a poetic labor history documentary. But this relationship also collapses artificial divides between oral, visual, and written compositions. In the first prose poem of the volume, for example, Nowak recounts testimony originally reproduced in news reports about an explosion that killed over 200 Chinese miners on the Lunar New Year Day in 2005. The title of this news report—“The Day that All Miners’ Wives Dread”—foreshadows what one woman felt about the day. According to the report, she “*feared the scene when the dead would be brought to the surface and laid out in cold rows on the ground, awaiting identification*” (Nowak, *CME* 2). This scene sounds eerily similar to the arranging of victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, all of whom were placed in rows before they were identified by their family members. The woman continues, “*I have no language for my feelings...and there’s no way anybody else can understand it*” (2).

It might initially seem that Nowak is capturing only a “still moment” of a woman seeking language to grieve over her seemingly inevitable reality. Her testimony—her oral recollection of her feelings—grounds the composition itself, which appears on the page as a photographic slide, worthy to be seen, read, and heard. However, if this is a still moment, it is one that contains within it infinite emotions. The woman’s admitted inability to speak about her emotions forces the reader to pause and consider the profundity of her loss of words. And as readers pause to reflect upon this moment by reading, listening, and seeing, they likely realize that there exists no

language for the moment when our deepest fears come true: when we lose a loved one to one of the most dangerous industries that exists; when our source of economic stability is completely upended; and when we must explain to our children that life as they know it will be forever changed because their father will never return home again. Thus, while Nowak's visual presentation of this poem alludes to a photographic slide, the content carries within it the voice of a calm yet grieving woman who demands that we, too, feel a flurry of emotions that have no name.

As we view the first slide of Nowak's volume, though, we view his second slide, this one in bolder ink, suggesting that the story within it might be slightly different. In fact, Nowak demarcates the materials used in *Coal Mountain* in a similar way as in *Shut Up Shut Down*: worker testimony (about the Sago Mine Explosion) appears in bold font, whereas news reports (about mining disasters in China) appear in italics. Like the first prose poem in *Coal Mountain*, the content of the second poem conveys an inability to speak about a mining disaster, but in this case the speechlessness stems from the speaker's desperate attempts to make sense of the day when twelve miners died in the then deadliest explosion West Virginia's history. Beginning *in medias res*, the first sentence of the testimony establishes the mood of the morning of the mine explosion:

**And that morning I just — I did actually notice though and I made
the comment of an old wive's tale, you know, what does this mean,
this lightning and thunder in January because where I'm from there's
always a — you know, the frogs in certain parts of the year and things
like that. (3)**

The speaker, a survivor of the Sago mine explosion, cannot fully put his thoughts into words, which is clear from his repetition of the phrase “you know” and the pauses in his speech, highlighted textually with the use of dashes. Rather than be frustrated with his inability to speak about the events of that day, he chooses to move forward in his testimony, trying to piece together the signs that might have served as a warning about the explosion. Reflecting upon the ominous and unseasonable January thunder that preceded the explosion, the speaker suggests that “there’s got to be a tale of some sort, you know” (3). Indeed, his mentioning of an “old wive’s tale” alludes to the folkloric belief that thunder in winter is a predictor of snowfall. In some versions of the tale, the thunder precedes a snowy blizzard. This belief, a superstition often attributed to rural working-class communities of Appalachia, carries within it knowledge based on experience and intuition, forms of knowledge often devalued for being less than scientific.

Thus, while the testimony might seem to clumsily move forward with significant pauses and possible omissions, it also establishes both setting and mood for the story that is about to unfold: on the morning of the Sago Mine Explosion in 2006, it was unseasonably warm, leading to thunder and lightning across the humid air. As men gathered to enter the mining pit, they wondered together “what could this mean” that the “lightning and thunder [were] carrying on so bad” (3). The worker’s experience with warm Januaries, as well as their instincts, knew something treacherous was upon them, though this knowledge only found meaning in hindsight, after reflecting upon the day’s events. In sampling this testimony, Nowak chooses to foreground and vindicate the instinctual knowledge of these workers, as he opens *Coal Mountain Elementary* with their elliptical words, allusions, and ominous imagery.

Importantly, throughout his volume, Nowak validates and visually emphasizes both sets of stories: the West Virginian miners’ testimony (in bold) and the news reports about mining

disasters in China (in italics). Both the bold and italicized prose poems are set in serif font, suggesting that all the words on the page are worthy of study and reflection. That said, Nowak elects to place heavier emphasis—the bold font—on the West Virginian testimony. Perhaps Nowak visually foregrounds this testimony because he is aware of his primary audience: American readers who might be particularly sympathetic to stories by and about American workers. However, the placement of the “slides” adjacent to each other, often throughout the entire volume, also suggests that the material should be engaged simultaneously, with one slide informing the other. Thus, while American readers might gravitate toward the bold testimony due to its content and font type, they cannot help but see the italicized words in the corner of their eye.

Ultimately, the different slides interact paratactically, where readers must deduce the relationship between the compositions and, if possible, fill in the gaps and omissions from one slide to the next. As Gavin Goodwin has suggested, “even though the cuts [between frames] are less frequent” in *Coal Mountain Elementary* (112), Nowak is still engaging with paratactic montage, where, as Dan Featherstone has noted in his review of the volume, “the reader must make connections between decontextualized documents, instead of relying on the writer to make them.” However, the paratactic montage in *Coal Mountain Elementary* works quite differently than the montage in *Shut Up Shut Down*. As with most paratactic texts, we do experience a “chain of images” (Kukulín 585), but the images in the testimony and news story are not really paradoxical or strange in their collision. Instead, Nowak’s slides push against each other visually with their font type, but the content and images are clearly thematically linked. The “strangeness” typical of parataxis, though, *is* achieved when readers are asked to reflect upon mining disasters in another country—not just in the United States. Thus, not only does Nowak

invite his readers to spend more time on each frame (or slide) in *Coal Mountain*; he also challenges his readers' values about work and nation; while *Shut Up Shut Down* confronts the racism and xenophobia of American working-class history, *Coal Mountain Elementary* "acts preemptively to counter such economically-based racial antagonism" (Goodwin 112). Gavin Goodwin lucidly elaborates upon the significance of Nowak's internationalist poetic praxis. He explains that the various narrative slides in *Coal Mountain*:

invite acknowledgement of shared experiences, encouraging...empathy. Nowak's text is 'transformatory' in that it opens the door to international worker solidarity in the face of globalized exploitation. Without stating as much, this combination of textual samples seeks to disrupt workers seeing their Chinese/North American counterparts merely as economic competitors, a view that can, if unexamined, mutate into racism and xenophobia (as in the case of Vincent Chin), and, at the very least, undermine any attempt to create an international progressive workers' movement. (Goodwin 112)

Thus, while *Shut Up Shut Down* interrogates the racial violence within working-class communities, *Coal Mountain Elementary* is a work of textual solidarity in which the staging of documents asks its American audiences in particular not to see workers overseas as their enemy. Instead, Nowak's sampled materials suggest that we are comrades engaged in a similar struggle, facing similar tragedies, telling similar stories about the work experienced in coal mines, and are part of the same bigger picture.

Further, just as *Shut Up Shut Down* enacts textual solidarity through its incorporation of the first-person plural, so too does *Coal Mountain Elementary*. In his interview with Philip Metres, Nowak explains that the bold passages of *CME* do not stem from "one person's testimony but testimonies from 75 interviews montaged into a collective first-person plural" (15). The miners,

perhaps alienated from each other due to time and other economic constraints, unite in Nowak's text to form a collective that, together, constructs a narrative about the Sago disaster from their point of view. Importantly, though, Nowak's polyphonic testimony does not stop with the American miners; instead, he unites their voices with those from news stories of mining disasters in China. The narrative "I" transforms into a unified "we," and this "we" becomes more and more diverse as we turn the pages. Too, the geographic and cultural distance between members of this economic and textual collective are no longer barriers within the pages of *CME*. While the distinct details of the miners' stories are important and validated within the volume, what is most important is their shared suffering under capitalism and the miners' and their families' willingness to speak about such suffering.

Ian Teh's striking photographs of Chinese miners, combined with Nowak's photographs of working-class mining communities in the United States, then help readers more clearly visualize this shared suffering of workers in the US and China. Two seemingly unrelated images on pages 86 and 161 of the book illustrate such shared suffering, all while creating visual space for the distinct lived experiences of workers in different countries. Nowak's photograph of a typical residential street in West Virginia, for example, is deceptively simple. In large capital letters, the message board in the top center of the page reads, "PRAY FOR OUR MINING FAMILIES" (86). Based on the sign alone, we might assume the subject of this photo is obvious: that a local business has expressed its compassion and solidarity with the miners and their families who suffered in the Sago Mine explosion. Upon closer inspection of the photo, however, we see that the image implicitly exposes an entire system that is complicit in the disaster. The punctum of this photo—the element that I cannot shake after each viewing of the image—is the red arrow on the left side of the image. While this arrow is meant to direct drivers to the exit of the parking lot,

in the space of this visual composition, it guides our eye to a camouflaged military vehicle that is passing the sign (see figure 18).



Figure 18: Nowak, Mark. Photograph of Street with Pray for Mining Families Sign. 2009. *Coal Mountain Elementary*, by Mark Nowak, Coffee House P, 2009, p. 86.

Without the red of the arrow, we might miss this detail, as the shades of green and black on the truck blend perfectly with the surrounding landscape. Immediately in front of this military vehicle is a Coldwell Banker sign, likely announcing that one of the homes on the left side of the street is for sale. To the right of this Coldwell Banker sign is a white pickup hauling a trailer with ramps, suggesting that this vehicle is used to transport other four-wheeled vehicles, such as small cars or ATVs. The right side of the street is then littered with business signs, suggesting that, while the left side of the street is residential, the right is zoned commercial. In the distance behind leafless trees, we can even see a reddish sign, likely advertising yet another business, possibly even a chain gas station.

Taken together, these textual details convey a story about this small West Virginian community. The message on the sign, with its call for prayer, has likely been recycled from previous calls for prayer. We can easily imagine that this sign previously read, “PRAY FOR OUR SOLDIERS” or “PRAY FOR OUR MILITARY FAMILIES.” The camouflaged Humvee is likely part of an army reservist unit, as several are located near Sago, WV, the most likely site of this image. Too, the conversion of this residential street into a commercial district is characteristic of small, economically challenged communities throughout rural America. With its houses for sale, young people joining the military, and fathers dying in mine disasters, this photo suggests that rural West Virginians are indeed battling for their lives. The economic condition of this rural state is the source of its suffering, and the mining disaster seems like one of many side effects (or symptoms) of this perilous condition. In fact, a study conducted by the Carsey Institute notes that West Virginia has been ranked as one of the most economically-devastated states in the US, where there have been “more deaths than births for a number of years” (Johnson).

The image on page 161 then jumps—both cinematically and geographically—to a photograph by Ian Teh. Pictured are seven un-masked Chinese miners combing through the rubble of coal to collect prime pieces and load them into buckets and wheelbarrows. In *CME*'s “Second Lesson,” Nowak samples from an elementary school lesson plan, which refers to the process that these photographed Chinese miners are engaging in as “cookie mining,” a term that becomes increasingly offensive as Nowak’s book progresses and arrives at this image (see figure 19).



Figure 19: Teh, Ian. Photograph of Miners Working in Coal Pile. 2009. *Coal Mountain Elementary*, by Mark Nowak, Coffee House P, 2009, p. 161.

In the overview of this lesson, readers learn that they will discover “the costs associated with the mining of coal” (Nowak, *CME* 65). Although the original lesson plan introduces students to finances and business management, when (literally) placed within the context of mining disasters in the United States and China, the “costs” refer to much more. Nowak samples a brief passage from the elementary school’s lesson plan, which indicates that the lesson (on how to make mining financially profitable) should take:

One
to two
class
periods. (80)

In this same lesson, Nowak samples a news source about a mining tragedy in China, noting that a “local taxi driver” commented that the tragedy “will continue to haunt us for years to come” (92). The claim in the lesson plan about the duration of the lesson is thus refuted by the taxi driver’s words. In fact, the tragedy and all of its effects will not merely take “one to two class

periods”; instead, the impact is a specter that will “haunt” the dreams of miners and their families as long as the goal of mining is profitability. Thus, the juxtaposition of text and ideas reveals “discontinuities” between what is taught to children and what happens on the ground in mining communities (Kukulin 586). The assemblage also creates “unexpected commonalities within the usual semantic order of the world” (586), as these passages offer the potential for meaning-making between three seemingly unrelated types of texts: a “fun” grade-school lesson plan, news stories about mining disaster and death, and an image of coal miners in China.

The two passages on pages 80 and 92 act upon each other in another related way: as Nowak lineates the phrase “one to two class periods,” he highlights the word “class,” suggesting that there are one or two classes. In the context of a book about mining and its relationship to capital, Nowak is clearly exposing the capitalist system as one that benefits from a contest between two classes: the working class and the capitalist class. And the reportage from the news source clarifies that the working class—including the miners, their families, and the taxi driver who reflects upon the tragedy—must intervene in this system or else “*sad stories will increase*” (CME 92).

However, as the book’s sections expose, this intervention is profoundly difficult when children are educated in such a way as to participate in the system itself. Pages 102 and 103, for example, juxtapose two directives to catalogue figures on/in a grid. The “Procedures,” which are taken from the elementary school lesson plan on gaining and losing profits when (cookie) mining, advises teachers to “Give each student / \$19 in play money, / [and] a sheet of grid paper” (102). The juxtaposition between a seemingly innocent teaching activity that invites students to catalogue information about chocolate chip cookies and an excerpt of testimony from a Sago Mine Disaster Survivor clearly exposes how the dispossessed are willfully forgotten. On page

102, we see that children learn to purchase cookies (which represent states) with their “play money,” and that they record their information on grid paper; immediately following this lesson we discover that, to identify the victims of the Sago Mine Disaster, individuals recorded “more or less a [numerical] code” (103). Even the man in charge of maintaining the Excel spreadsheet on the day of the mine explosion could not remember the name of the first man found dead in the “track heading” (103). In the lesson plan, children are taught that mining is fun, simple math, where mining properties are easily traded; however, the testimony and photographs reveal the hidden human costs of this business. Children are encouraged to joyfully participate in the process of profiting from coal mining, ignoring the real costs associated with the industry, a reality all too real for children who have lost fathers and brothers to mining accidents. The ideological training at the grade school level, though, prepares students to willfully forget the human life associated with coal mining.

This particular lesson is also troubling in that it advises students in the process of reclamation. We learn in Part One of the lesson’s procedures that “Coal companies / are required by federal law / to return the land they mine / to its original, or an improved, condition. / This process...is a significant expense for the industry” (94). Students, then, must discover how to mine enough chocolate chips from their cookie-states so they can still yield a profit after spending their play money to return the cookie to its original condition. The irony of this reclamation process in the mining industry is highlighted in a color photo in this same section (see figure 20).



Figure 20: Teh, Ian. Photograph of Billboard against Hilltop. 2009. *Coal Mountain Elementary*, by Mark Nowak, Coffee House P, 2009, p. 79.

A large rectangular billboard stares at the reader, presenting a green, mountainous landscape with yellow fields below and a blue sky with white billowing clouds overhead. The billboard suggests that all sources necessary to sustain life are available in the image, as trees are present in the foreground. In Ian Teh's photograph, it appears that this billboard has been intentionally placed directly in front of a mountain that has been mined completely, stripped of its life. Mute browns and tans reminiscent of the Dust Bowl surround the billboard, while a few bushes foreground the main photograph as straw-like grass appears to break along the ground. Just behind the billboard, along the ridges of the mountain, carved into the mountain are mine shafts, still faint brown, evidence that the mountain has literally been stripped of its natural resources. On one hand, the billboard suggests that, once the process of reclamation is complete, the landscape will be restored to such an idyllic scene as painted on the sign.

However, since the image on the billboard is itself framed by a white border, and the colors of the image are far too neon to be found in nature, the billboard calls attention to its own artifice. The actual landscape has been "drained of its spontaneity and glee" through the process

of underground and strip mining (McGrath 48), and the unreal presentation of the painted landscape reminds us—much to the dismay of the mining corporations—that the land will never be able to return to such a state. As the “National Standards” for the teaching lesson—identified three pages earlier—indicate, mining is essentially about “Production, / Distribution, / and Consumption” (*CME* 76). Read in the context of the photograph of the billboard juxtaposed against the barren landscape, it is clear the earth is consumed by such processes in favor of production and distribution of natural resources.

Reclaiming the land is just one of the many “costs / associated with coal mining” (94), and the testimony and news reports, staged alongside the photographs and lesson plan excerpts, challenge the efficacy and motivation of such a process. For example, immediately following the “National Standards” we encounter a brief passage in which a survivor of the Sago Mine Explosion testifies:

And I just mingled around, waiting to see what was —. Waiting on the other crew to come out. I thought surely the other crew would be coming out right behind us. And that didn’t happen. (*CME* 77)

The worker testimony, bereft of specific details about the explosion, forces readers to make basic inferences: the worker “mingled around” once he exited the mine shaft, suggesting that he felt it was an appropriate time to socialize with his fellow workers. However, we understand from his final sentence, reminiscent of a Hemingway novel with its brevity and submerged meaning, that the remaining miners were consumed by the earth because of the explosion caused by the mining process.

The news reports from mining incidents in China and the testimony from Sago survivors further respond to the elementary lesson’s discussion question: “What do you think are some of

the costs associated with mining coal?” (*CME* 87). While the lesson for children likely anticipates a financial response given that the activities have invited students to make “cookie profits,” Nowak’s staging of documents offers a different response. Some of these costs, suggested by the sampled materials, are the loss of time, a sense of security, and even oxygen. We learn from a sampled news report toward the end of the book that coal mines sometimes contain cracks and leaks, so that when “181 [Chinese] men [were] trapped underground in a flooded coal mine [there was] little hope of rescue” (*CME* 169). The fate of these men was to drown in floodwater and soot as they gasped for air. The testimony from a Sago survivor on the following page helps us imagine the last moments of miners’ suffering as they “gather up the materials and...get cinder blocks or stoppings and...find a suitable spot and build a wall and plaster it air tight” (*CME* 170). This survivor warns that, when faced with a loss of time and oxygen, “[i]f you can’t find anything else” to build a temporary shelter to preserve oxygen, “you use mud from the bottom,” concluding that “You’re talking about desperate times there” (*CME* 170). As if speaking about his comrades in the Sago Mine Disaster *and* in the flooded Chinese mine that was discussed on the previous page, this speaker concludes, “Men that got killed. That was my crew” (*CME* 170). Nowak’s staging of these two documents forms a textual collective in which the speaker becomes aware that his fate in West Virginia is intimately tied up with the fate of miners in China, that all miners are his “crew.”

A collective is thus formed within and out of Nowak’s sampling of documents in *Coal Mountain Elementary*, especially with his insistence upon the first-person plural and in his staging of words and images by and about miners in West Virginia and China. Taken together, these strategies characterize his practice of textual solidarity, which forges connections where they might otherwise be ignored. Like Rukeyser in the thirties, Nowak’s textual solidarity

depends upon a poetics of connection, but like Llewellyn, his is internationalist in its orientation since the connections he both stages and reveals are between presumed economic competitors. In both content and form, Nowak's internationalist textual solidarity lessens the politically imposed racial and geographic divisions between workers, and it offers a vision and strategy that depend upon human connection and class consciousness to confront capitalism in all its stages.

Conclusion:

Internationalist Textual Solidary and the “New World Order”

The world is our home. It is also the home of many, many other children, some of whom live in far-away lands. They are our world brothers and sisters...

~ James Agee, “Preface,” *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

International solidarity is necessary to confront the social evils we face at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century. Now, more than ever, we need models for connection, relationality, reflection, and action—action that disrupts and revolutionizes the global economic system beyond a Trumpian protectionist shift in the neoliberal policies that still govern the United States, namely those policies that have upheld and fostered poverty, white supremacy, classism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia.⁴⁴ In short, we need practices and policies and art grounded on international solidarity, and we must avoid those that attempt to divide the global working class; we must understand that the liberation of the working class in one part of the world is directly linked to this liberation in another part of the world.

Contemporary artists C.D. Wright and Deborah Luster, Cynthia Hogue and Rebecca Ross, Chris Llewellyn, and Mark Nowak and Ian Teh all hold subjects of economy at the center of their poetic projects, and they offer textual examples of solidarity—connection-making, deep listening, empathy, citation, and counter-narratives via their use of sampling, juxtaposition, ekphrasis, and parataxis. These textual examples of solidarity serve as unique models for solidarity action in the here-and-now. In many ways, solidarity is empathy-in-action, so we must consider what we can do to connect with each other more meaningfully, to listen to each other more deeply, to uplift and give credit to marginalized voices, and to take action to revolutionize the systems that lead to this marginalization. And following Llewellyn and Nowak, we must consider this work in a global context with the understanding that, as the motto of the Industrial Workers of the World puts it, “an injury to one is an injury to all,” that our individual liberation is deeply bound with the liberation of all of humanity.

One Big Self, When the Water Came, Fragments from the Fire, Shut Up Shut Down, and Coal Mountain Elementary are, of course, not the only contemporary books that I could have

discussed in this project that focuses on social documentary poetics and contemporary poetry of work grounded on the notion of solidarity. Together, however, these books serve as strong “case studies” to help us better understand the *doing* of contemporary social documentary poetics, a self-reflexive doing that leads to the important work of working-class memory-building, a necessary step in the process of achieving solidarity.

These books, which embrace the call to slow down their audience’s reading process, pose a challenge to global capitalism and the divisions that uphold and are caused by it. This aesthetics of slowing down obviously demands something of us, the readers. As Harold Schweizer posits in *Suffering and the Remedy of Art*, “Contrary to the desires of knowledge to *close* the unanswerable questions opened by suffering, art keeps knowledge *open*” (210), like a “wound,” forever gaping, and thus “becomes an occasion where our reading, or listening, or looking is itself a suffering” (Schweizer 210). Schweizer suggests that empathetic reading—the search to know the unknowable—is itself an *experience*. This experience *is* distinct from the lived experiences of suffering translated in the art, yes, but it is still an experience, one that might help us identify and stand in solidarity with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed.

So long as readers are actively engaged with the texts on both an intellectual and emotional level, they have the potential to share an experience with poetic subjects and other attentive readers to both liberate and form our collective—and distinct—working-class memories. This newly-formed collective of informed, engaged, and compassionate readers is prepared for thought, which, in the words of Muriel Rukeyser, may lead to action since readers will “want to go further into the world, further into [themselves], toward further experience” (26). The reading experience ensures that the individual stories embedded in the texts are validated as lived experiences, despite what mainstream media and big businesses value in times of crisis. Even

more, because these lived experiences of suffering are called up again in the reading process (however imperfectly), there is the potential for forging connections between seemingly disparate individuals who may be separated by time and space; that is, there is potential for textual and internationalist textual solidarity. And this possibility of solidarity, which may—and must—extend off the page as well, is precisely why contemporary social documentary artists self-reflexively risk doing the impossible...because it is an ethical imperative.

Notes

¹ Photography was the medium Brady used to capture the American Civil War, and its development merits its own brief history. I turn to Alan Trachtenberg, one of the world's premier photography scholars, to offer a succinct history of the invention of the photograph. In the prologue to his classic text, *Reading American Photographs*, he explains that that what we now call "photography" was known by many names throughout the early nineteenth century, though it always referred to the process of "fixing of an image on the ground glass of a camera obscura" (3). Guiding light to capture the negative of an image was quite familiar by the time the word "photography" was coined in 1839; in fact, Renaissance painters "outfitted a similar device...with a focusing lens to help them trace perspective lines" (4). The image produced by a camera had become "second nature"; indeed, it offered the "true look of reality which painting attempted to imitate" (4). However, for these painters, the projected image of the camera obscura had only been used to aid them in their drawing and painting. Throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century, however, Frenchmen Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre and Joseph Nicéphore Niépce and Englishman William Henry Fox Talbott discovered how to affix the camera image onto a hard surface, producing more than just a trace of an image. Daguerre, Niépce, and Fox Talbott developed methods to fully capture an image on a surface, without the human hand intervening to draw the image. The image written by the light through the camera obscura was assumed to be natural since the captured image was instantaneous and the human hand had been removed from the drawing of the image. In 1839 this new process—photography—was announced to the public, and its official name aptly meant "writing with light" or more succinctly, "light-writing."

² Citations used to document quotations from Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* refer to the number of the plate that the text accompanies.

³ Importantly, Riis's book is not the only early photopoetic collaboration in the US. For example, Dodd, Meade, and Co. published six volumes of poetry by Paul Laurence Dunbar between 1899 and 1906, each with photographs accompanying the poetry. While the photographs are certainly documentary in nature, these important and interesting works are outside the scope of literary-historical predecessors to my project since I specifically focus on solidarity texts with representations of labor, and I focus on poems that are documentary on their own (i.e.: draw from published or investigative sources).

⁴ "The rest of them would get along alright."

⁵ See Joseph Harrington's, "Docupoetry and Archive Desire" in *Jacket2*, published on October 27, 2011.

⁶ See the preface to Marjorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (2010).

⁷ See the introduction to *The News from Poems: Essays on the 21st-Century American Poetry of Engagement* (2016).

⁸ The term "documental" was used by Russian scholar Ilya Kukulín in his 2010 essay, "Documentalist Strategies in Contemporary Russian Poetry," for similar purposes, though Leong does not credit Kukulín in his otherwise thoroughly researched study.

⁹ Leong is not the only contemporary critic to voice such a claim. In his interesting and valuable "Profiles of Lived Experience: Charles Reznikoff, Muriel Rukeyser, and Mark Nowak," William Dow sees these three poets (who are often discussed in relation to each other because of their specific types of formal experimentation, self-reflexivity, and overtly political themes) moving within separate traditions. He suggests, for example, that contemporary poet Mark Nowak's praxis is distinct from the social documentary projects of the 1930s and 40s, where he places Rukeyser, because Nowak's work is not didactic, "closer to a contemporary literary-journalistic aesthetic than conventional or 'modernistic' forms" (Dow 129). I would argue that Nowak's work is very much didactic, though without being "prescriptive," as David Ray Vance has suggested in "Radical Documentary Praxis [Redux]" (342). By "literary-journalistic," I assume Dow is suggesting that Nowak's work is more focused on reporting objectively, in this case, reporting the objects (the documents) he samples. My understanding of the difference between documentary and journalism, however, has less to do with objectivity (by any definition or application of the word) and more to do with time spent with one's sources.

¹⁰ The conversation in this chapter clearly highlights the troubling nature of language and why language and representation matter so much to literary scholars.

¹¹ Leong's *Contested Records* moves our discussions of documentary poetics away from a notion of *doing* such work. His project focuses on texts that prioritize citation and appropriation from those "objects and artifacts stored in offices and archives, on disks and in databases" (2).

¹² As Joseph Harrington has implied, some conceptual poets both reproduce and decontextualize documents ("The Politics..." 81), and this decontextualization of language and documents is what has garnered conceptual poetry intense criticism, especially since Goldsmith's tone-deaf poetry reading in 2015. In fact, Goldsmith boldly concludes in his *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* that "language has become mere material to be

shoveled, reshaped, hoarded, and molded into whatever form is convenient...Because words are so cheap and infinitely produced, they are detritus, signifying little, meaning less” (218). This attitude toward language thus gives rise to radical play and experimentation with found materials, though typically with little social or historical engagement because, as Goldsmith has claimed, to the conceptual artist: “Any notion of history has been leveled by the internet. Now, it’s all fodder for the remix and recreation of works of art...History is one glorious big undifferentiated heap...and what happens is that [some readers of conceptual poetry] generally don’t know — or care — about those former histories” (Smith and Goldsmith). Goldsmith’s claims that language is now “mere material,” that “signif[ies] little,” and that “history is one glorious big undifferentiated heap” are themselves ahistorical; he chooses shock and play over responsibility to the Other. He celebrates an inability to create collective memories grounded in historical fact and instead prioritizes the constructive element of creating an interesting, clever non-history, which is antithetical to a working-class project of liberation. Perhaps, however, we cannot allow Goldsmith (and Perloff, for that matter) define this shift in poetry. Lifting up the voices and works of poets like Rankine and Philip would be more productive.

¹³ I realize that my use of the word “successful” is subjective and potentially problematic. “Successful,” in the context of social documentary poetics, refers to projects and poetics that achieve or begin to achieve their purpose, which presumably has a social function. Certainly, a number of factors contribute to such success, including the presence and availability of the work, which are linked to issues of time, money, and publishing. Still, “successful” is a useful adjective. Perhaps Kenneth Goldsmith thought he was doing important social-conceptual work when he remixed Michael Brown’s autopsy report at a public performance in 2015. But his was an unsuccessful project. This is in part because he failed to answer two questions for himself before his reading: “For whom?” And “why?” That said, if he believes his own comments in his interviews when he refers to his deep desire to be a celebrity among poets, even one who is criticized in his contemporary moment, then his was a successful project. Then his project would be about the self, not the social, in which case I would not call it a social documentary poem. But then we get into matters of intent...

¹⁴ See Nowak’s “Notes toward an Anti-Capitalist Poetics II” and David Rae Vance’s “Radical Documentary Praxis [Redux],” both in Claudia Rankine’s and Lisa Sewell’s *American Poets in the 21st Century: The New Poetics* (2007).

¹⁵ See Hogue’s blog post “On Writing (of) Disaster,” published on *aboutaword* on September 20, 2010: <http://aboutaword.blogspot.com/2010/09/cynthia-hogue-on-writing-of-disaster.html>.

¹⁶ In his 2018 study, *Photopoetry 1845-2015, a Critical History*, Michael Nott resurrects the term “photopoetry” and suggests that is a “distinct form of photo-literature.” He claims (correctly) that both photography and poetry “are concerned with images: the visual immediacy of the photographic image against the unravelling, modifying, accumulating verbal images that emerge from the poem. [In addition,] both, independently, deal with the seen and the unseen. The tightness and concision of the lyric poem, for example, reminds the reader of the photographic frame: What is happening just out of shot?” (16-21). Nott’s discussions of the relationships between poetry and photography are valuable to my study even as he is not entirely focused on documentary texts of work, as I am in this project. Nott understands documentary books of poetry as just one process or style of producing photopoetry.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, the defense attorneys for Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company at the time of the 1911 fire, discredited witnesses for the prosecution by claiming that their stories were inconsistent. Many of the survivors of the fire, for instance, remembered being the first to arrive at an exit door to find it locked. Of course, it is not possible for all of the workers to have been the first, but their experience—as they remember it—was that they were the first and that they felt the initial frustration of not being able to exit. Likewise, some of the witnesses (again, survivors of the fire) recalled hearing their coworkers shout warnings about the fire that they could not have actually heard since they worked on different floors. Max Steuer used these inconsistencies to discredit their testimony and to give the impression that the immigrant women workers were unreliable and not to be trusted. From Žižek’s perspective, however, the workers’ confusion could be a testament to the trauma they experienced, and the blending together of facts and experiences is part of what happens when we tell stories about traumatic events—thereby lending credibility to their stories and experiences.

¹⁸ In “Sear,” Llewellyn reminds us that she is making poetic and ideological choices when she “add[s],” “revis[es],” and “arrang[es]” (55).

¹⁹ See Harold Schweizer’s *Suffering and the Remedy of Art*.

²⁰ See Miriam Ching Yoon Louie’s *Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Workers Take on the Global Factory*.

²¹ Janet Zandy and Karen Kovacik have each argued something similar in their respective essays, “Fire Poetry on the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911” (1997) and “Words of Fire for our Generation: Contemporary Working-Class Poets on the Triangle Fire” (1998). My chapter builds from their important work in at least two ways: first, I look more extensively at Llewellyn’s textual project as a whole, whereas Zandy’s and Kovacik’s essays

survey the “fire poetry” of several contemporary poets. And secondly, I rely on conversations about memory and history to expand upon and clarify how Llewellyn’s book “tap[s] a collective memory of class oppression” (35).

²² See Nancy Green’s “Fashion, Flexible Specialization, and the Sweatshop” and chapter two of Laura Hapke’s *Sweatshop: The History of an American Idea*.

²³ In 2011, all 146 victims of the Triangle Fire were identified by independent researcher Michael Hirsch. A complete list can be accessed through the ILR School’s Kheel Center, which is part of Cornell University. See www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/.

²⁴ All quotations from *Fragments from the Fire* come from the 2016 edition, unless otherwise noted.

²⁵ I extend Tokarczyk’s analysis of solidarity work in *Fragments from the Fire* and argue that Llewellyn’s formal strategies of composition, including juxtaposition and appropriation, are examples of *textual solidarity*, in which the text models the kinds of connection-making necessary to express solidarity. Llewellyn does not only reveal solidarity with her poetic content; she also models solidarity with her aesthetic and rhetorical choices. Readers then participate in such solidarity work when they engage the text and uncover the connections between the surprising juxtapositions—connection-making that must extend beyond the page as well.

²⁶ In the first two editions of *Fragments from the Fire*, the poem suggests that news headlines labeled Horton a “Heroic Elevator Man”; however, this is incorrect. Giuseppe “Joe” Zito was hailed as the hero, and this misinformation was corrected in the third edition of *Fragments from the Fire*.

²⁷ See the Red Cross’s “Emergency Relief Report after the Washington Place Fire, New York, March 25, 1911”: <http://archive.org/stream/emergencyrelief00charrich#page/28/mode/2up>.

²⁸ I offer this example of the December 2010 fire in Dhaka because of the similarities between it and the Triangle Fire. I could cite any number of garment factory disasters, however, including the most significant garment factory disaster in history, which took place in 2013 when the Rana Plaza collapsed in Dhaka, Bangladesh, killing over 1100 garment workers.

²⁹ While Llewellyn’s account is partially—and necessarily—fictionalized, Sophie Salemi and Della Costello were neighbors from Cherry Street, as the poem also suggests, and they did both die from jumping from the 9th floor of the Asch Building during the fire (Stein 148). These names, however, were likely not the birth names of these two workers. If we look at the comprehensive list of names of the victims of the Triangle Fire, which is maintained by the Kheel Center of Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations, we can account for the difference

between the names in the poem and official names on the list of 146 workers. “Della Costello” was the nickname or Americanized version of Josie Del Castillo, who, in 1911, lived a few doors down from Santina (Sophie) Salemi on Cherry Street.

³⁰ Llewellyn repeats and underscores this image of garment workers as each other’s “true sweethearts” again in her poem “Sear,” which poetically recounts information from primary historical sources: “A testimony: Two tried to stay together / on the ledge, but suddenly one twisted / and plunged, a burning bundle. The other / looked ahead, arms straight out, speaking / and shouting *as if addressing an invisible / audience*. She gestured an embrace then / Jumped” (*Fragments* 55).

³¹ Figures 7 and 8 were not included in the first two editions of *Fragments from the Fire*; however, in the third edition of her book, Llewellyn chose to reproduce the photograph of the flower-laden carriage that was pulled through crowded streets in the silent funeral procession for the unidentified victims of the fire.

³² In his *Introduction to Documentary*, Bill Nichols outlines six dominant modes of documentary filmmaking in the twentieth century: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative.

³³ In the first two editions of *Fragments from the fire*, Llewellyn includes only 10 jurors’ names, leaving out Joseph Jacobson, a salesman, altogether. Further, the names “Abraham Wechsler” and “William O. Akerstrom” were combined to form “Abraham Akerstrom.” In my communications with Llewellyn, I discovered that these were oversights and have been corrected in the third edition.

³⁴ Here I refer to the bodies of the garment workers who died in the fire, as well as the bodies of the readers that are dynamized from of the reading of this book.

³⁵ Cara A. Finnegan’s *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* outlines the discourse about poverty from colonial times through the 1930s Depression, noting that there has always been a “pervasive distinction between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor, a marginalization of the ‘pauper’ as a lazy, often dangerous member of the underclass, and the dominance of the work ethic as a moral and civic duty” (8).

³⁶ See David Ray Vance’s “Mark Nowak: Radical Documentary Praxis [*Redux*]” in *21st Century American Poets*.

³⁷ In *One Big Self*, on the other hand, Wright and Luster present the faces of incarcerated men and women, faces that, like Nowak’s industrial buildings and labor, are no longer visible. Unlike the buildings, however, these inmates do exist—as laborers, mothers, fathers, and children. Their invisibility is also linked to economic injustice, but the

photographs in *One Big Self* testify to the *existence* of these faces, these living beings, and together the portraits and poetry dignify and memorialize their “big selves.”

³⁸ In *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (2010), Marjorie Perloff suggests that, “[i]n the climate of the new century...we seem to be witnessing a poetic turn from the resistance model of the 1980s to dialogue—a dialogue with earlier texts or texts in other media, with ‘writings through’ or *ekphrases* that permit the poet to participate in a larger, more public discourse” (11).

³⁹ I abbreviate *Shut Up Shut Down* as *SUSD* in my in-text citations from this text.

⁴⁰ Contrast Nowak’s efforts to construct a collective of voices in his poetic praxis with those of labor poet Jim Daniels’s. In a 2012 interview with Todd F. Davis, Daniels stated that “the main difference for me [between poetry and film] is that film is such a collaborative process, particularly in these low-budget independent films. It puts [him] in contact with creative people from many other art forms” (251). Whereas Daniels seems to write off the collaborative potential of poetry, Nowak not only knows it is possible to produce such poems; he suggests that it is politically imperative that poets figure out how to do so.

⁴¹ The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 significantly weakened the Wagner Act of 1935, also known as the National Labor Relations Act, which is considered to be the most important collection of labor laws in US history. The Wagner Act gave workers the right to organize labor unions, to collectively bargain, and to strike when they deemed necessary; the Act further prohibited employers from interfering in any way with their employees as they exercised these rights. In response to the growing strength of unions and anti-communist sentiment post-WWII, the Republican-majority Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, which gave the president of the United States the ability to interfere in labor disputes. It also made solidarity strikes illegal.

⁴² For a description of Fr. Rice’s red-baiting activities, which strengthened the anti-communist CIO and weakened the UE and notion of radicalism in the Catholic Church, see Steve Rosswurm’s “The Catholic Church and Left-Led Unions: Labor Priests, Labor Schools, and the ACTU” in *The CIO’s Left-Led Unions*, 1992, pp. 119-137.

⁴³ I follow Nowak’s lead and abbreviate *Coal Mountain Elementary* as *CME* in my in-text citations from this text, which distinguishes these citations from those from *Shut Up Shut Down*.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Daniel Bessner’s and Matthew Sparke’s “Don’t Let His Trade Policy Fool You: Trump is a Neoliberal” from the March 22, 2017 edition of *The Washington Post*.

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