WORK, EXPERIMENT, AND SOLIDARITY: THE TRANSFORMATORY POETICS OF MARK NOWAK

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Abstract

In the latter part of the twentieth century, North American poets such as Tom Wayman and Jim Daniels began to practise and theorize a poetry of the workplace that Wayman called the 'New Work Writing'.[1] This writing emerged to meet a perceived lack in the majority of twentieth-century literature: namely, writing specifically from and about the industrial workplace. This *new* work writing defined itself, in part, against socialist realism and the tendency in the 'proletarian literature' of the 1930s to privilege politics above descriptions of the actual experience of work. However, the 'New Work Writing', as theorized by Wayman, was in many ways just as prescriptive as socialist realism, and similarly sceptical of experimental modernism and its inheritors. It is somewhat ironic, then, that arguably the most prominent North American work-related poems of the twenty-first century have been written (or aggregated) by Mark Nowak, a formally experimental poet.[2] Much of the previous scholarly criticism of Nowak's work has focused on the documentary aspects of his work.[3] This article, however, will discuss Nowak's texts within the context of 'work writing', and his attempts to reimagine this mode of writing as a transformatory social practice, through experiments on the page – *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004) and *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009) – and beyond it in his transnational poetry dialogues.

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[1] Tom Wayman, *Inside Job: Essays on the New Work Writing* (Madiera Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1983).

[2] This is not to suggest, however, that Nowak is working in isolation here. There are a number of other North American poets/activists of Nowak's generation (such as Rodrigo Toscano, Jeff Derkson, and Juliana Spar, to name only a few) whose political concerns and poetic experimentalism overlap significantly with Nowak's.

[3] See David Ray Vance, 'Mark Nowak: Radical Documentary Praxis [Redux]', in *American Poets in the 21st Century: The New Poetics*, ed. by Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell (Middletown: Wesleyland University Press, 2007), pp. 336–52, and Joseph Harrington, 'Docupoetry and Archive Desire', *Jacket2,* (2011) < http://jacket2.org/articles/archive/201110 > [accessed 3 March 2012].

In *Inside Job: The New Work Writing*, Tom Wayman noted the absence of representations of work in poetry, and especially representations written by people actually involved in the work being described. Consequently, for Wayman, the 'New Work Writing' aesthetic

> is distinguished by looking at work with an *insider's* eye, rather than the eye of an outsider, however sympathetic. Only in this way is an *accurate* depiction of the situation possible, since even a sympathetic outsider can miss what it *feels* like to be personally involved in a given situation or event.[4]

Wayman also refers to this writing as 'Internal Realism' – as opposed to the 'External Realism' of artists who are observers of, rather than participants in, the work they depict. Socialist realism is also, according to Wayman, a form of external realism because it 'uses an external ideological framework to try to bend or alter what is happening to fit a preconceived pattern'; that is, a preconceived party line. By contrast, the 'New Work Writing' is characterized by '"the abandonment of heaven", since missing entirely from these new poems is any sense that participation in the work force will lead to any particular future, let alone a glorious socialist one'.[5] Instead the internal realist depicts, often with humor, the 'nitty-gritty of [a] particular job' and its attendant social, emotional, and technical complexities. This isn't to suggest that Wayman's project is apolitical. On the contrary, he states:

> No political party or government in the world wants democracy extended to the workplace. . . . It follows that the new poetry that accurately portrays work is, in my opinion, the *essence* of political poetry, even when its content consists solely of revealing some aspect of daily work in our time and place.[6]

This is so because 'internal realism'/'New Work Writing' encourages workers themselves to write. It 'insists that we must act for ourselves, that no 'professionals' or 'representatives' can do it for us'.[7] It encourages a participatory rather than a representative democracy. In Wayman's view, work is the great repressed subject of North American literature, and only by bringing this fully into cultural consciousness is any kind of social transformation of it either likely or possible. This writing about the workplace – and the writing

[4] Tom Wayman, *A Country Not Considered: Canada, Culture, Work* (Concord: Anasi, 1993), p. 137.
[5] Wayman, *Inside Job*, p. 40.
[6] Wayman, *A Country Not Considered,* p. 137.
[7] Wayman, *Inside Job*, p. 49.

groups and anthologies that can grow from this – can 'perform in a small way', Wayman argues, 'the social function previously provided by a belief in class solidarity'.[8]

Despite Wayman's effort to differentiate his work-writing aesthetic from that of socialist realism and some of the aesthetic preferences of the proletarian literature of the 1930s, some similar arguments emerge. Just as Mike Gold (author of the quintessential proletarian novel, *Jews Without Money* (1930)) claimed the 'verbal acrobats' of experimental modernism were 'only another form of bourgeois idleness',[9] Wayman prescribes that the 'New Work Writing' 'should avoid non-realistic modernism and experimental poetry'.[10] Such reservations are echoed by fellow 'work poet' Jim Daniels.[11]

This view of experimental poetry would seem to place the 'New Work Writing' on one side of the 'Mainstream/Alternative Tradition' divide, to use Ken Edwards' (2000) terminology. Edwards defines mainstream poetic practices as those that use language normatively to construct a coherent narrative or argument from a single point of view, and end with a sense of closure and/or epiphany. On the other hand, making up the alternative tradition, we find poems in the lineage of experimental modernism that demonstrate non-normative language use – such as 'extended vocabulary and/or broken syntax, parataxis' and language used 'as material or sound'. These texts often have '[m]ultiple viewpoints or foci' and resist closure, remaining open and indeterminate.[12] Although Wayman situates the 'content' of the new work poems in opposition to mainstream literature (of the 1970s and 1980s), in terms of technique, many of the poems in Wayman's work writing anthologies follow what Edwards terms the 'mainstream' approach. The

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[8] Wayman, *Inside Job*, p. 50.

[9] Mike Gold quoted in Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory 1910 – 1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 104.

[10] Wayman, *Inside Job*, p. 71.

[11] Jim Daniels, 'Work and Working-Class Poetry: The Zip Code of the Heart', in *New Working-Class Studies*, ed. by John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkan (New York: Cornel University Press, 2005), pp. 113–36.

[12] Ken Edwards, 'Two Poetries', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 5 (2000), 25–37 (p. 34).

Given the cultural prominence of 'avant-garde' poetries, particularly Language Poetry in the U.S. (and Rae Armantrout's winning of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2010), it is perhaps no longer accurate, fifteen years on, to say that all of these poetries exist outside the 'mainstream'. However, the divide in poetics that Edwards identifies in this article remains relevant to discussions of contemporary poetry, and the clarity of his schema was especially useful to me in writing this article.

following poem, 'Timers', by Jim Daniels (included in Wayman's anthology *Paperwork* (1991)) is an example of this. It opens thus:

> A man with a stopwatch stares
> at my hands, his thumb on the button.
> He is timing how long it takes me
> to take this part, put it in my machine,
> push two buttons, take it out.[13]

Written from 'inside' the job, Daniels depicts in detail machine operation. The man timing the poem's speaker is doing so to see if the speaker's job can be 'eliminated'. The speaker attempts to lighten the situation with a joke, but the timekeeper has 'bright orange earplugs' in and cannot hear. The poem ends:

> Somebody somewhere's got a watch
> on him too. Somebody's put us both here
> where we can't hear each other.[14]

The poem is effective in illustrating how both machine operator and time-keeper are trapped in an isolating capitalist industrial system. And implicit in the final sentence is a moving plea for solidarity. The poem achieves its effects by following the 'mainstream' model outlined above: it forms a coherent narrative, depicting scenes and experiences from a single point of view, and progresses logically to its poignant climax.

Conversely, Mark Nowak's work writing looks decidedly different. Take for instance the opening of the first section of '$00/Line/Steel/Train' from *Shut Up Shut Down*:

> The basic form is the frame; the photograph of the factory predicts how every one (of the materials) will get used. **And I can remember Mark & I talking about the possibility of Lackawanna becoming a ghost town** Past (participle) past (participant) past (articulating) an incessant scraping (away). **And what would we do. You know – it wasn't just losing a job in the steel industry, but your entire life, the place that you grew up in was going to be gone.** As I scraped

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[13] Jim Daniels, 'Timers', in *Paperwork: An Anthology*, ed. by Tom Wayman (Madiera Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1991), p. 199.

[14] Daniels, 'Timers', p. 199.

(grease, meat, omelettes), the (former) railroad workers and steel workers (still)
bullshitting in the restaurant where for eight years I short-order cooked.

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       Who knew
  the crisis
          from the conditions −
 presumably
 the Capital [Who][15]

I will discuss Nowak's writing more extensively below but suffice it to say
here that it is immediately visually distinct from the Daniels poem. The text
is laid out on the page in an innovative approximation of the haibun form.
But rather than a prose travelogue followed by a haiku, the reader is greeted
with a mix of typefaces that simultaneously offer multiple viewpoints *and*
draw attention to the materiality of the language itself. Even taking into con-
sideration that this is only the first section of an eighteen-section text, it is
strongly indeterminate − the final opaque, lineated sentence offers little by
way of closure in comparison to the Daniels poem. This text is unambigu-
ously rooted in the experience of work − 'I scraped (grease, meat, omelettes)'
− and the consequences of its absence − '**it wasn't just losing a job in the
steel industry, but your entire life**'. However, Nowak's work here is
clearly utilizing techniques from the 'alternative tradition' of experimental
modernism.

Generally the aesthetic divisions between the 'Two Poetries' do not divide
clearly along class (or even political) lines. However, the reservations expressed
by Wayman and others are partially informed by considerations of employment
and class, and, in this article, I will restrict my discussion of poetic technique to
such considerations. The argument against avant-gardism in work writing is
based partly on an assumption that working-class readers enmeshed in the ex-
hausting world of low-pay work, mostly do not want or have time to decode
the more avant-garde complexities of a text. In other words, a difficult poetry
will not find a suitable interpretive community among the working class because
it utilizes literary techniques that presuppose knowledge they might not possess.
It is an argument that embraces Pierre Bourdieu's contention that '[t]here is a
link of mutual dependence between the nature of the texts offered for reading
and the form of the reading done of them'.[16] In the academy, for instance, texts

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[15] Mark Nowak, '$00 / Line / Steel / Train', *Shut Up Shut Down* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee
House Press, 2004), p. 11.

[16] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan
Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 305.

are read in a situation of '*studious leisure*'[17] where play, such as the language play of difficult poetry, is taken seriously. Therefore, the writer writes for a reader who is disposed to engage with such texts in this privileged context.

There is, no doubt, truth in this. However, as I will argue below in relation to the aesthetic strategies of hip hop, popular culture successfully utilizes a range of techniques that, when encountered in literature, are often still referred to (and perhaps dismissed) as avant-garde.[18] Furthermore, if an anti-experimental approach (as advocated by Wayman) means closing off multiple poetic modes, by perhaps arguing that they are not working-class enough, then (despite its honorable and seemingly sensible motivations) it is making a series of presumptions about its audience and potential practitioners that are very problematic. Due to the impact of so many other variable factors (gender, ethnicity, religion, upbringing, schooling, temperament, taste), disagreements regarding which aesthetic approach best suits people from certain socio-economic backgrounds and/or in certain workplaces are unlikely to reach any satisfying resolution. And it is not my intention here to argue for the greater suitability of one kind of poetics over another. But if such anti-experimental prescriptions solidify into unquestioned doctrine, they risk depriving both work writers and readers of a variety of artistic options that might potentially provide new sites for the development of political consciousness in the work-places of the twenty-first century. It is the creation of such sites that Mark Nowak's poetic experiments – developed in response to workplace workshops and performances – have sought to achieve.

A generation younger than Wayman, Nowak (b.1964) grew up on the east side of Buffalo, New York in a largely Polish neighborhood. His family was working-class and Nowak himself spent eight years frying burgers in the fast-food chain *Wendy's* while singing and lyric-writing for 'goth–industrial/ electronic bands'.[19] At university, Nowak began 'experimenting with chance-generated polyvocal texts that could be performed by choruses of speakers' and 'organizing "community open shares", a public space for those in and outside of the college community to come together and share creative work'.[20] These factors – Nowak's social class, his experience of electronic

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[17] Ibid. p. 305.

[18] The kind of strategies I am referring to here are polyphony and collage. However, the *obscurity* of modernist poetry has also often been criticised. For a helpful discussion of the distinction between 'obscure' and 'difficult' poetry, see J. H. Prynne, 'Difficulties in the Translation of "Difficult" Poems', *Cambridge Literary Review*, 1/3 (2010), 151–66.

[19] Mark Nowak, in Philip Metres and Mark Nowak, 'Poetry as Social Practice in the First Person Plural: A Dialogue on Documentary Poetics', *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12 and 13 (2010), 9–22 (p. 11).

[20] Mark Nowak, in Steel Wagstaff, 'An Interview with Mark Nowak', *Contemporary Literature*, 51 (2010), 453–76 (p. 460).

music-making, and his early experiments in polyvocality and 'community open shares' at college – all significantly shaped the kind of 'work writing' he went on to produce – one formally different from the 'New Work Writing' which preceded it.

Despite sharing certain interests and aims with the New Work Writers, Nowak admits that

> [t]hose working class anthologies of the early 1990s . . . always rang to my ear like Bob Seger and were too full of college professors who spent a year or two in a factory while they were in college.[21]

Consequently, rejecting the 'New Work Writing' of the late twentieth century, Nowak's first poetry collection, *Revenants* (2000), is largely a product of the ethnopoetics movement. Nowak studied with the folklorist Ellen Stekert, and it was as an assignment for her class on field methodologies that Nowak produced 'Zwyczaj', the first of the two more obviously experimental pieces in *Revenants* (the other is '"Back Me Up"'). 'Zwyczaj' addresses the practice of pierogi-making (a pierogi is a traditional Polish dumpling made from unleavened dough). In this poem Nowak uses quotations from an interview he conducted with his mother (the boldface type) and quotations from Elizabeth Goldstein and Gail Green's 'Pierogi- and Babka-Making at St. Mary's'. He juxtaposes these with quotations from the textbook *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* to create a self-reflexive triad of voices:

> "For them the preparation
> "of *pierogi* . . . is an act of religious
> "devotion
>   "selfless and meritorious."
>
> (When the ethnographer writes
> "them," he or she
> must locate an ethnographic subject
> within . . .
>
> **"[My mother] cooked them
> in the basement** . . .
> **this way the mess is always
> down there."**[22]

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[21] Mark Nowak, personal correspondence with the author, 12 July 2013.

[22] Mark Nowak, 'Zwyczaj', *Revenants* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2000), p. 84. Nowak's ellipses.

This 'tri-vocal' technique, employed in both 'Zwyczaj' and '"Back Me Up"', is Nowak's attempt at 'textually disempowering absolute truth claims'.[23] But it is also the beginning of what will become the governing principle of Nowak's poetics: the rejection of the first-person singular in favor of experimenting with the first-person plural. And it is this 'tri-vocal' technique, in varying forms, that Nowak carries into his next two books, books that are dominated by representations of work (or the damage resulting from its absence). These books, *Shut Up Shut Down* and *Coal Mountain Elementary*, establish a work writing that is radically different from that of Wayman and Daniels.

Wayman advocated writing from inside the job itself; thus poems of work should be written by those actually doing the work described – not those observing or imagining it. Nowak has not worked in many of the occupations addressed in *Shut Up* and *Coal Mountain*, such as the steel and auto industries and mining. But the voices in the poems *are* very much from inside the work worlds they interrogate. Building on the model he developed in 'Zwyczaj', Nowak circumvents the 'personal experience' requirements of Wayman's 'New Work Writing' by quoting verbatim from worker testimonies. As a result these texts give a palpable sense of 'what it *feels* like to be personally involved' in such occupations. But rather than *just* providing an insight into the work experience, by subjecting these voices to an intensive remix process, entwining them with various other textual sources, Nowak creates polyphonic and polytemporal collages that invite the reader to make politically invigorating connections.

To look more closely at just how Nowak's experimental work writing functions, we can examine a poetic play from perhaps his most formally challenging collection, *Shut Up Shut Down*. 'Capitalization' is the first of two experimental poetic plays included in the collection, and is constructed entirely from found materials, or 'textual samples' as Nowak prefers to call them (the significance of this terminology will be discussed below). This multi-track sequence has three main threads. The italicized, and perhaps most dramatic, 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*

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[23] Nowak, in Metres and Nowak, p. 14.

Elements of Grammar (1986) on the use of capitalization. The poem–play looks like this:

Before the crash of 1929,
I accepted things without question.
The evening classes at the Y
Caused me to question, but I had no answers.
Bryn Mawr was the turning point.
The girls from the garment industry,
from Sweden and other places
talked of their unions
and how they worked.
That hit home.
Thousands of air traffic controllers
walked off the job at 7 a.m. yesterday,
snarling air traffic across the nation
and drawing an ultimatum from President Reagan,
who said his administration will fire any striking controller
who has not returned to work by 11 a.m. Wednesday.
Capitalize a title of pre-eminence
or distinction following the name of a person
or when used alone as a substitute for a name.
Ronald W. Reagan, fortieth President of the United States;
the President; the Chief
Executive; the Commander in Chief[24]

The multiple type faces and lack of obvious poetic devices (beyond line breaks) immediately differentiate this from a standard lyric poem. The relatively quick cutting between textual samples means that the poem makes for a challenging read. The reader first encounters what seems to be a rather random selection of fragments, and it takes a while to acclimatize. But once able to navigate the shifts, the reader becomes simultaneously emotionally involved with the two central narratives (Reagan and the controllers' strike, and unionism and red-baiting at Westinghouse). How these are relevant to each other broadens and deepens the reader's experience.

   Both strands unfold chronologically. The italicized text details Reagan's time at General Electric Theater and his tour of GE factories spreading anti–communist propaganda. It progresses to the PATCO strike, reporting on the stand-off and its aftermath (i.e. the firing and imprisonment of the participants). The bold text begins with the financial crash of 1929 and the first

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[24] Nowak, 'Capitalization', *Shut Up Shut Down*, p. 38.

stirrings of unionism at Stasik's Westinghouse plant. After becoming record-
ing secretary of the UE, she describes how she became a target of red-baiting
and vilification in the press. This strand ends – after McCarthy hearings; her
sister being hounded into ill-health by the FBI; and the death of her husband
– with Stasik moving to Vermont and selling eggs. The parallels between the
two threads are obvious, and Nowak's braiding of them highlights how the
PATCO struggle was part of a much longer and larger struggle for equality
and workers' rights in the USA.

  The reasoning behind the inclusion of the Shertzer grammar guide in this
politically engaged collage – beyond the play on 'capital' – is less obvious. If
the former strands are emotionally gripping, then this strand functions more
cerebrally. But choice excerpting and the power of juxtaposition have a cu-
mulative effect that becomes more resonant with each section:

> **The company really won that fight.**
> **When they attacked the UE,**
> **they broke up a good, honest union.**
> **I think Father Rice is a little ashamed**
> **of the role he played then.**
> Capitalize the *Pope*, or the *Popes*, always;
> also *Holy Father, Pontiff*, and *Holiness*
> Capitalize *Devil, the Evil One,* the *Adversary*
> *President Reagan has said there would be*
> *"no amnesty" allowing a controller*
> *to retain his job if, without a valid reason*
> *such as sickness, he had missed*
> *the deadline for returning to work.*
> *Mr. Lewis said the only reason*
> *many more notices had not gone out today*
> *was "a matter of mechanics."* [25]

The religious figures connect the two unrelated Stasik and Shertzer segments,
but the way the textual splice into the third thread reads 'the *Adversary/
President Reagan*' (the splice made more seamless due to the use of italics) in-
verts a normative view of the relationship between a president and the people
he was elected to serve. As the one-time head of the Screen Actors Guild,
Reagan occupies, within the text, the role of hypocritical oppressor. On the
other hand, this demonic triad of aliases – '*Devil*, the *Evil One*, the *Adversary*
– also alerts us to the *terms* in which the union/collectivist activities re-
counted in the text have been persistently *demonized*. The onset of the Cold

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[25] Nowak, 'Capitalization', *Shut Up Shut Down*, p. 51.

War left any attempt to secure greater fairness in the workplace – by those like Stasik who were impoverished by the economic hierarchy – vulnerable to accusations of being not only anti-capitalist, and thus in league with the Red Devil of communism, but also by extension un-Christian, and ultimately un-American. The juxtapositions in Nowak's text invite multiple productive readings. But his textual braid works ultimately as a powerful and moving device for raising class-consciousness and political awareness. The inclusion of the Shertzer grammar guide serves not just as a resource for subversive wordplay, but highlights the importance of pedagogy. Despite its modernist strategies, Nowak's poetic play, like those of Brecht, is unashamedly educative.

'Capitalization' clearly voices 'inside the job' perspectives – albeit from particularly fraught political circumstances. But in consideration of the anti-experimentalist position outlined above, could it be argued that the text's poetic method risks alienating those it seeks to represent? For some readers, the answer is yes.[26] But the idea that such techniques exclude worker-readers in general is very questionable. I have already suggested that due to so many other contributing psychosocial factors any such blanket assertions are untenable. But here I would like to concentrate on one (though many others could be cited) contemporary cultural practice, that of sample-based hip hop, that rather obviously troubles such assertions. It is the terminology that Nowak himself uses in relation to his work that points to the viability of this comparison. He refers to his use of '[t]extual *samplings*'[27] (my italics) rather than found materials or quotations. The artistic genre we most readily associate the word 'sample' with is the digital sampling compositions of hip hop and electronic music, where sampling refers to the lifting of a segment of a sound recording. As if to indicate how his texts should be approached (and perhaps to pre-empt any accusation of modernist elitism), Nowak has repeatedly in interviews and articles flagged up his background as an electronic musician, and the influence of hip hop and electronic music more generally in his writing.

> Today, I still tend to think and create less like a poet and more like a musician at a multi-track recording system. Most of my work is composed of multiple voices mixed on separate tracks, all fused or articulated into one final artwork.[28]

[26] See Danusha V. Goska, '*Shut Up Shut Down*: Review,' *The Sarmatian Review,* (2005) <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~sarmatia/405/254goska.html> [accessed 4 July 2013].

[27] Nowak, *Shut Up*, p. 90.

[28] Mark Nowak, in Liz Axelrod, 'Interview with Mark Nowak', *12th Street: Writing and Democracy*, January 14 (2011) <http://www.12thstreetonline.com/2011/01/14/mark-nowak-interview/> [accessed 30 July 2011].

Nowak has claimed the recent work of the DJ/producer Danger Mouse as an influence on his poetics and has previously stated that 'Jam Master Jay taught me to "sample" long before Ezra Pound did'.[29] This last comment serves to demonstrate the overlapping artistic lineages of Nowak's writing method: literary modernism *and* New York hip hop – with the latter, it is suggested here, being preeminent.

   Hip hop itself emerged as an art-form from the black working-class neighborhoods of 1970s New York, and in its recorded form reached an early apogee with Grandmaster Flash's multi-track collage 'The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel'. The sample, here, estranged from its original sonic environment, is heard differently – and sometimes more potently – in a new contextual set of relations.[30] Later in the 1980s, this sampling method began to be used by some for explicitly socio-political ends. The most prominent exponent of this highly politicized version of hip hop was of course Public Enemy. In 'Fight the Power'(1989), for instance, the raps work in conjunction with the sampled material to produce what Robert Walser has called 'a dialectic of shifting tensions'.[31] Whilst the lyrics critique the discriminatory aspects of the dominant white culture ('Elvis was a hero to most/But he never meant shit to me/Straight up racist that sucker was'),[32] the samples (of The Dramatics and James Brown, for instance) offer an affirmation of black culture. As Mark Katz has commented:

> The use of the word *sample* is significant. Public Enemy's remedy [to what they perceive as a racist cultural hegemony] is to provide its own samples, literally in the form of digitized snippets – performative quotations – of the work of its underrepresented heroes.[33]

To an even greater extent than in Grandmaster Flash, the samples here are exceptionally fragmentary. Before the rappers even begin, over a dozen samples – of both speech and music – have been collaged. 'In just one 4 s segment (0:24–0:28),' Katz notes, 'at least ten distinct samples are being

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[29] Mark Nowak, quoted in Piers Hugill 'Class War in the Rust Belt', *Jacket,* 28 (2005) <http://jacketmagazine.com/28/hugi-nowa.html > [accessed 4 February 2010].

[30] Grandmaster Flash, *The Adventure of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel* (Sugarhill, 1981).

[31] Robert Walser, 'Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy', *Ethnomusicology*, 39 (1995), 193–218 (p. 204).

[32] Public Enemy, 'Fight the Power', *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam Recordings/Columbia Records 1990).

[33] Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, revised edition (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 162–63.

looped'.[34] The effect of this has distinctly modernist *and* educative aspects. As Public Enemy producer Keith Shocklee comments:

> We decided that we wanted to communicate something that was three dimensional – something that you could look at from many different sides and get information from as well as entertainment.[35]

The song's multiplicity invites the listener to make connections – political and cultural – between the samples. And rather than this being an aesthetic method that excludes, Walser argues that it is 'the flexibility and multiple perspectives of hip hop' that attracts many listeners.[36]

Nowak's textual sampling and Public Enemy's musical sampling are both, in their different ways, cultural interventions aimed at giving voice to those who have previously been 'unrepresented'; both are concerned with creating informative or educative as well aesthetic objects; and both re-combine materials from a variety of sources to create polyphonic collages. This last point is pertinent when contesting the arguments of those that equate formal experimentation with elitism, and label experimental any poem that veers too far from the linear, monological utterance. Although it is fair to say that 'Fight the Power's innovative and abrasive aesthetic was not the approach that led hip hop to be the multi-billion-dollar industry it is today, *Fear of A Black Planet* (the album on which 'Fight the Power' features) has sold over two million copies. This does not indicate anything about the 'quality' of this art form, of course, but it does prove that it is a *popular* one. Therefore, it is probable that many of those in the workplaces Nowak addresses will be familiar with, and possibly appreciative of, sample-based compositions.

If Nowak's work utilizes the contemporary practices of ethnopoetics and sample-based music-making, it also looks back to the revolutionary literature of the 1930s – particularly how the production of this literature was situated in the context of broader social and political movements. Although for most of the twentieth century much of this 1930s work has been dismissed for being 'unimaginatively polemical', Cary Nelson and others[37] have attempted to rehabilitate the reputation of some of these texts by demonstrating that 'many journals continued to publish political poetry that was experimental,

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[34] Katz, pp. 160–61.
[35] Keith Shocklee, quoted in Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip Hop* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p. 115.
[36] Walser, p. 211.
[37] See particularly Nelson's *Repression and Recovery* and Joseph Harrington, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

rhetorically complex, and explicitly modernist'.[38] What much of this work actually shows, argues Nelson, is that 'an aesthetic revolution can be articulated to a social conscience'.[39] This is the kind of work that Michael Denning refers to as the 'proletarian avant garde';[40] and it is not difficult to see the parallels between Nowak's work and a proletarian avant-gardist like Tillie Olsen. Olsen's poem 'I Want You Women Up North To Know', adapted from a letter (sent to *New Masses*) indicting the Juvenile Manufacturing Corporation for exploiting Chicana garment workers, can easily be seen as a precursor to Nowak's work writing, both in its dependence on previous documents and its self-conscious rejection of 'bourgeois' poetics.[41]

However, it is the social and politically engaged context in which the poetry of the 1930s was produced that I would like to dwell on here. The sheer proliferation of radical journals – and the readers they reached – created a very different and potentially transformative context in which poets might work. The many journals associated with the John Reed Clubs along with *The Rebel Poet*, *The Anvil* and perhaps most prominently *New Masses* and *The Daily Worker*, put writers like imagist-cum-revolutionary poet Isidor Schneider in contact with an expanded and committed group of 'responsive readers'.[42] In his 'Toward Revolutionary Poetry' he details the transformative effect of such responsiveness: 'I received letters; people came up to me; workers' clubs invited me to lecture to them. Writing a poem was no longer a lonely and dead operation, but a living act.'[43] It is very much this kind of context and 'living act'-experience that Nowak is looking to create. Disheartened by reading from *Revenants* to an 'already pre-determined, pre-constructed audience'[44] 'composed solely of poets', when writing the work-orientated poems of *Shut Up* he 'began collaborating with working class organizations on a variety of writing/cultural projects'.[45] As the elected chair of his local Political Committee of the National Writers' Union, he began cultural programming in the union hall at the (now shuttered) Ford assembly plant in St. Paul. This included staging a reading of another of his verse plays from the book, 'Francine Michalek Drives Bread'. As a result,

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[38] Nelson, p. 234.

[39] Ibid. p. 234.

[40] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Labouring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998), p. 64.

[41] Tillie Olsen (1934) in *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930–1940*, ed. by Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz (New York: Feminist Press, 1987), p. 179.

[42] Isidor Schneider, quoted in Nelson, p. 159.

[43] Ibid. p. 159.

[44] Nowak, in Metres and Nowak, p. 14.

[45] Nowak, personal correspondence.

come publication, the launch party for *Shut Up* was sponsored by the union of the Ford plant. Nowak recounts that a 'fabulous crowd of Ford workers [were] out at the event, in addition to the local literati'.[46]

These activities were conscious attempts by Nowak 'to construct a new audience, a new social space'[47] closer to that of the workers' clubs of the 1930s. By creating and engaging with such an audience he is able put to the test otherwise abstract and speculative theories about what kind of poetics do and do not work in any given context. And the development of Nowak's poetics since *Shut Up* have grown out of this engagement – for instance, the move to using much longer textual samples in Nowak's following book, *Coal Mountain Elementary*. Nowak has said:

> teaching poetry workshops between shifts inside the closing Ford assembly plant in St. Paul . . . self-criticisms of *Shut Up* began to arise. Given the project of re-positioning my poetry as social practice, the speed, if you will, of the montage, of the jump cuts, in *Shut Up* felt too quick for me.[48]

Coal Mountain uses a selection of italicized excerpts, in-bold verbatim testimonies, pedagogical texts, and photographs to address mining disasters in the USA and China, and is evidently a continuation of the documentary project started in *Revenants* and developed in *Shut Up*. But the jump-cuts between the materials in this text are much slower. For example, each in-bold voice, derived from the Sago Mine Accident Report and Transcripts – an accident where an explosion killed twelve coal miners in 2006 – is given a page to itself. (The passage that follows details the jubilation felt when the twelve dead miners are thought, for a moment, to be alive.)

> **And I've only – at that time, I had only been drunk once in my life, but it was absolutely euphoric, the feeling there, because, you know, I had done the math a couple times before and I didn't expect to hear that, as far as, you know, one cubic air – one cubic yard per hour per man at rest. And I have to say even with the birth of my children, that was the happiest, most – best news I had ever heard in my life.[49]**

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Nowak, in Metres and Nowak, p. 14.

[48] Ibid. p. 14.

[49] Mark Nowak, *Coal Mountain Elementary* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2009), p. 109.

The structure of the in-bold testimonies of the Sago miners is an example of
what John Beverley has called (in relation to the writings Ernesto Cardenal
and Rigoberta Menchú) the 'polyphonic testimonio', where

> Each individual testimonio evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other
> possible lives and experiences. Thus, one common formal variation on the
> classic first-person singular testimonio is the polyphonic testimonio, made up
> of different participants in the same event.[50]

In *Coal Mountain* the in-bold thread reads as if it is one first-person singular
testimony about the Sago disaster, but it is, in fact, a collage of seventy-five
miner interviews – it is a 'collective first-person plural'.[51] And this collective
account of one particular mining disaster in the USA is juxtaposed with a list
of newspaper reports of similar disasters in China. For example, the Sago tes-
timony quoted above lies adjacent to a twenty-one line newspaper excerpt.
The first five and half lines read as follows:

> *More than 150 Chinese coal miners were dead or missing yesterday following three separ-
> ate accidents in seven days, prompting renewed calls for better safety in the nation's no-
> toriously dangerous industry. The death toll from an explosion on Wednesday at the
> Liuguantun colliery in the northern province of Hebei rose from 74 to 87, as rescuers con-
> tinued their search for at least 21 other miners still unaccounted for.*[52]

This text follows the successful poetic blueprint of 'Capitalization' but ex-
pands and extends it over a whole book, shifting the focus from PATCO and
Westinghouse to mining disasters in both the USA and China. And these
adaptations have taken place as the result of an engaged dialectic with those
actually in the workplaces addressed in the writing. Yet even though the cuts
are less frequent, Nowak is still, as Dan Featherston notes, constructing a *writ-
erly* text here. Polyvocal and paratactic, the text's modernist roots are clear –
'the reader must make connections between decontextualized documents,
instead of relying on the writer to make them'.[53]

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[50] John Beverly, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: University of
Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 34.
[51] Nowak, in Metres and Nowak, p. 15.
[52] Nowak, *Coal Mountain*, p. 108.
[53] Dan Featherston, '"What Kind of Poem Would You Make Out of That?"': A Review of
Coal Mountain Elementary,' *Jacket2* (2011) <http://jacket2.org/reviews/what-kind-poem-
would-you-make-out > [accessed 4 March 2013].

If the technique of *Coal Mountain* grows out of those employed in 'Capitalization', aspects of its subject matter link to another sequence in *Shut Up* – 'June 19, 1982'. 'June 19, 1982' addresses the murder of Chinese-American Vincent Chin by two fellow Detroit autoworkers. In the late 70s, Japanese automakers expanding market share had resulted in US redundancies, and it was alleged that, because he was mistaken for Japanese, Chin's murder was racially motivated. Nowak's poem is an exploration of this event and its causes that interrogates how certain *economic* contexts provided fertile social and psychological grounds for such destructive emotions and lethally violent behavior to emerge. *Coal Mountain*, however, acts pre-emptively to counter such economically-based racial antagonism. The parallel excerpts from *Coal Mountain* quoted above invite acknowledgement of shared experiences, encouraging (though not prescribing) empathy. Rebecca Johns has differentiated between accommodatory and transformatory forms of worker solidarity.[54] The former tends toward protectionism and nationalism in its accommodation of capitalism (i.e. 'Buy American' campaigns), the latter, on the other hand, aims for an international solidarity that will 'prevent capital playing places against each other'.[55] 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.

Nowak has continued these practices beyond the text. Like Wayman, Nowak sees workers writing for themselves as crucial (to be 'represented' by committed others is not enough). But for Nowak, as for Johns, if this writing is to be transformatory it must traverse national boundaries. Thus for the past decade Nowak has run transnational creative writing workshops with a variety of labor-based social movement groups. The earliest of these was a worker-to-worker poetry dialogue between Ford employees in the USA and those in South Africa – encouraging the very transnational empathy and solidarity that *Coal Mountain* worked towards in textual form. Nowak filmed readings by worker-poets from the Ford plant in St. Paul and played them to Ford workers in Port Elizabeth and Pretoria, who responded with their own poems. However, in keeping with Nowak's professed first-person plural

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[54] Rebecca Johns, 'Bridging the Gap between Class and Space: US Worker Solidarity with Guatemala', *Economic Geography*, 74 (1998), 252–71.

[55] Johns quoted in Mark Nowak, 'Imaginative Militancy and the Transnational Poetry Dialogue', *Radical History Review*, 112 (2012), 173–83 (p. 175).

poetics, these workshops do not only focus on producing individual lyrics. They also use 'Capitalization' as a platform from which 'to start thinking about collaborative verse plays that the workers write and perform to-gether'.[56] Such collaborative, choral works weave related subjectivities into a collective work as the following example from the Pretoria workshops demonstrates:

> We cannot pay
> our monthly services
> and fees
> for the education of our children
>   Oh! What a life!
> Loan sharks
> keep our bank cards
> because we live
> on loans
> Oh! What a life!
> For managers to get training
> it takes a phone call
> For workers to get training
> we take to the streets
> Oh! What a life![57]

Each stanza is written and performed by a different worker and in perform-ance the whole group voice the refrain collectively. These workshops and performances provide a space wherein workers can creatively express and in-terrogate what they think and feel about the work they do. But these im-aginative activities also allow workers 'to envision a new narrative' beyond the economic and ontological restrictions of neoliberalism.[58] For Nowak it is this first-person plural approach, in his own compositions and in those he fa-cilitates for others, that is key to liberating workers and writers alike from the hold of a neoliberal individualist consciousness.

Despite overlapping concerns and commitments, it is this sustained em-phasis on the first-person plural (rather than anything necessarily avant-garde or experimental) that differentiates Nowak's poetic and social practice from the 'New Work Writing' of the late twentieth century. Wayman identified an important omission in North American literature, and he has tried persist-ently to remedy this through his own work and edited anthologies of often

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[56] Nowak, personal correspondence.
[57] Quoted in Nowak, 'Imaginative Militancy', p. 180.
[58] Nowak, 'Imaginative Militancy', p. 181.

moving and humorous work-poems. For Nowak, however, a poetics of the workplace such as Wayman's that restricts itself to the first-person singular, is, in the end, too easily assimilated into an individualist, neoliberal agenda – an ideology that loves 'I' and fears 'we'. To begin to think and write in the first-person plural, on the other hand, is, in Nowak's view, to begin to think outside the neoliberal paradigm.[59] But such texts and practices must take place within the context of transformatory, transnational social movements. The imaginative and the activist are co-dependent and as such must be coterminous. Therefore, it is probably not particularly helpful to call Nowak's literary practice simply a *new* 'New Work Writing'; nor to say, with Adrienne Rich, that Nowak is 'regenerating' working-class literature for the twenty-first century.[60] Perhaps we would do better to use a term that Nowak himself has adapted from Kim Moody,[61] and call the textual and extra-textual activities discussed in this article attempts to instigate a new kind of 'social–movement literature'.[62]

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[59] As such, the efficacy of this poetic model is not necessarily restricted to texts about industrial labour (and its decline); it is also pertinent to addressing the precarious and often non-unionised post-industrial workplaces of the twenty-first century. It is beyond the scope of this article, however, to explore this fully here.

[60] Adrienne Rich, quoted on the back cover of *Shut up*.

[61] Kim Moody, 'Towards an International Social-Movement Unionism,' *New Left Review*, 225 (1997), 52–72.

[62] Nowak, personal correspondence.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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