Re-Constructing the Rust Belt:
An Exploration of Industrial Ruin in Blogs, Fiction, and Poetry

by

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

"This book, then, is about interpretations, about the places where we rework what has already happened to give current events meaning….The past is re-used..."

     – Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*

The Rust-Beltization of the United States

"Rust Belt" once signified a confined geographic space. When *Time* magazine's business journalists circulated the term at the nadir of the 1980s recession, it pointed to a specific region of the United States.: the beleaguered manufacturing zone of the Great Lakes basin.[1] In the 1970s and 1980s, the "heavy" auto, rubber, and steel industries that supported America's international preeminence in manufacturing suffered waves of factory shut-downs, as multinational corporations rapidly disinvested in this heavily unionized region. Some corporations, such as Youngstown Sheet and Tube, ceased operations and furloughed employees with little advanced warning.[2] In

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[1] In *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-1984*, historian Steven High traces the emergence of the "Rust Belt" label from prior popular-media references to the industrial heartland's "Rust Bowl" (29-31). As business journalists engaged in "Depression talk" to explain the recession, they drew on the visual iconography of the Great Depression. Yet this cultural reference point began to lose purchase when factories such as U.S. Steel's Ohio Works and Youngstown's Brier Hill Steel Mill were not only shuttered but razed. When it became clear that deindustrialization had more permanent effects on the industrial heartland than even the intense but confined ten-year period of the Great Depression, the term "Rust Belt" was coined in counterpoint to the up-and-coming "Sun Belt" industries of the Southern U.S. (33).

[2] For workers' accounts of sudden layoffs, see: Charles Craypo, "The Deindustrialization of a Factory Town: Plant Closings and Phase-downs in South Bend, Indiana, 1954-1983" (1984); David Bensman and Roberta Lynch, *Rusted Dreams: Hard Times in a Steel Community* (1987); Thomas Fuechtman, *Steeples and Stacks: Religion and Steel Crisis in*

Youngstown, "Black Monday" still marks the day in 1977 when the Campbell Works laid off 5,000 workers. Nevertheless, Quentin R. Skrabec, Jr., a former steel manager turned business professor, calls deindustrialization a "slow," insidious decline: "its widespread effects have remained under the radar for most of the public at any point in time," he states, because "deindustrialization attacks and destroys locally and slowly" (20). Dozens of monographs on individual plant closings published in the 1980s and 1990s support such a localized framing of crisis.[3]

However, as digital media advance to capture and circulate evidence of repeated and ongoing recessions, "the Rust Belt" spreads. While the term once marked – and contained – a specific site of decline, now the Rust Belt ranges across regions and economic sectors. Exceeding its localized meaning, the term now registers a social condition: "rusting out," for which abandoned buildings are the quintessential sign. Now Los Angeles has a Rust Belt; New Orleans has a Rust Belt as well.[4] Sprawling spatially and culturally, the Rust Belt label lends a gritty materiality to varied forms of decline, abandonment, and decay (or, depending on one's position relative to these conditions – an opportunity for creative re-vision). Ironically, the locational specificity of "the Rust Belt" marks an uncertain territory: an overdetermined social landscape whose porous boundaries have invited myriad cultural workers to explore and define its meaning.

My dissertation invokes the indeterminacy of the Rust Belt to name a conceptual territory whose borders are still uncertain: a *Rust Belt* field of inquiry. A fundamental premise of my dissertation is that artists approaching the Rust Belt from a variety of sites, in old and new media, are

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Youngstown, Ohio (1989); Gregory Pappas*, The Magic City: Unemployment in a Working-Class Community* (1989); Cedric N. Chatterley and Alicia J. Rouverol, *"I Was Content and Not Content": The Story of Linda Lord and the Closing of Penobscott Poultry* (2000); Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown USA: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (2002).

[3] See especially the works listed above.

[4] France, China, and Brazil have their own Rust Belts. However, this global context for decline exceeds the scope of this U.S.-focused project.

actively shaping its cultural significance. However, no analytic framework currently exists to encompass these diverse engagements. Scholarly conceptions of the Rust Belt remain under-developed, but I embrace this state-of-becoming. My dissertation investigates three genres of contemporary cultural work on the Rust Belt: beginning with Urban Explorer photo-texts, I proceed to a discussion of Rust Belt fiction, and conclude with an in-depth study of activist Mark Nowak's documentary poetry. In this rich if unexpected archive, so many conceptual connections link my sources that I could configure my research in a variety of ways. I chose this particular sequence not to imply a linear or progressive narrative, but rather to retell the story of my project's development and honor my own conceptual links. Each case study foregrounds a distinct concept, which I offer as a key for interpreting that text – or genre's – encounter with the Rust Belt.

I discovered the web culture of Urban Explorers after "roof-topping" the Carrie blast furnaces overlooking Braddock, Pennsylvania. One night in 2007 I and my brother, an Urban Explorer who goes by the name mANVIL, climbed the catwalks to the top of the coal stoves on the #6 furnace. The site had not yet been purchased by the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area, and it felt like we had the sprawling campus to ourselves. One-hundred-twenty feet off the ground, I could see Braddock, East Pittsburgh, and across the Monongahela River, the row of smokestacks signposting the Homestead Waterfront Mall. My grandmother used to tell stories about the Homestead Steel Strike of 1919, when a mounted policeman chased her down the street and rode his horse into her house, where her father and four other unionized steelworkers lived. Her uncle jumped out the kitchen window. She hid in a trunk. Eighty-seven years later, I stood in open air on the furnaces that smelted iron from ore for the Steelworks, which were now reduced to ornamental pillars. That night, with Carrie's 20-storey smokestack still standing behind me, I felt a personal connection to the furnaces, and I wanted to learn their place in the Homestead strikes.

3

When researching the Carrie Furnaces, I began by simply typing the phrase into Google.com, seeking to gain a sense of its public imagery. The search turned up not literary works or professional photo-texts but hundreds of "unofficial" photographs from "Urban Explorer" websites. Some were "raw" documentary photos, many taken from the ground to emphasize the behemoth size of the blast furnaces. Others were layered exposures that drew out the deep red pigments of rusted scaffolding, giving it a comic-book intensity. Some of these "UrbEx" images, especially those posted on personal blogs, came paired with written accounts. I had been looking for *history* – facts about the scale of labor stoppage, confrontations between management and union leaders, and the steel barons' strike-breaking strategies. I found instead a cache of "industrial ruin" images digitally curated by self-styled, present-day artists and Explorers. These digerati described the furnaces as "abandonments," "industrial decay," and "brownfields indeed," but the concept of "ruins" predominated (Motts). This term is freighted with historical baggage – but so too are the buildings that draw such UrbExers. These "decaying residues of the industrial age" – what Andreas Huyssen theatrically deems "the monstrous blast furnaces of former steelwork" – have a special lure within UrbEx culture and Western culture more broadly (6). After reading hundreds of UrbEx photo-texts; interviewing Explorers; accompanying them on excursions through Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Youngstown, and Detroit; and joining web forums where they post their photos for each other's critique, it is clear that industrial ruins center the culture of Urban Exploring. They are the Explorers' primary sites – and sights – of engagement. Before I elaborate on this premise, I will define the significance of "industrial ruin" for UrbExers and my project.

By recalling Baroque and romantic traditions of *Ruinelust*, the term highlights a fascination now focused on the Rust Belt landscape. With its sublime connotations, "industrial ruin" signifies the massive size of abandoned factory complexes, the unprecedented scope of closure and decay spanning the "global Rust Belt," and the sense of finality tied to industrial closure. Factories were

4

built to work, and their productive histories magnify the sense of an ending when corporations close-shop. When no longer taken for granted as part of the quotidian life of labor, the industrial landscape becomes receptive to grander imaginings. Umberto Eco once remarked that "apparently, most architectural objects do not *communicate* (and are not designed to communicate), but *function* (qtd. Markus and Cameron 6). Yet, for Urban Explorers who do not depend on the continued functioning of factories, abandonment inverts Eco's paradigm. When industry loses its everyday use-value, its structures become "strange" and intriguing, and Explorers invest them with a mythic significance. Their fascination with abandoned hotels, schools, churches, theaters, train stations, and amusement parks expands the taxonomy of "industrial ruin" to include the collateral damage of disinvestment in local manufacturing sectors. These public and commercial buildings have become prime UrbEx locations in Rust Belt towns where capital flight has withered local resources.

Urban Explorers are post-industrial opportunists. To preserve their pastime, they require that ruins proliferate, as Explorers relegate industrial labor to a bygone era. Industrialism, for them, becomes a useable past that they can appropriate by physically exploring and photographing the ruins. Their photo-texts raise a question fundamental to this project:what becomes visible – and what is occluded – when abandoned buildings are the primary site/sight of engagement. If UrbExers are the only actors present (as they compose the scene in their photos), then how do audiences access those local stories displaced by Urban Explorers' personalized visions of industrial ruin? Such "gaps" in UrbEx story-telling, I argue, illuminate the narrative stakes of a uniquely postindustrial condition: where – in which alternative media and locales – might these local stories, those that UrbExers ignore, avoid, or even withhold, have a voice? What are the mediums of industrial ruin, and how do these mediums influence the message and politics of the Rust Belt?

Novels and short stories, I felt, might offer one ground for imagining what it means to *live with* ruins. Indeed, imaginative literature appeared to me uniquely positioned to interpret industrial fallout as a felt experience processed over time. Where I expected to find industrial ruins in U.S. fiction from the 1970s-80s, "the golden age of industrial ruination," I found spare mention of Rust Belt landmarks until the fin de siècle (Edensor 5).[5] Yet by the late 1990s and early 2000s – coincident with the flourishing of UrbEx photo-culture – we can trace the development of what I call "Rust Belt fiction," a category that exceeds regional designation. Beyond the criterion of a Rust Belt setting, recent novels and short stories by Helen Campbell, Michael Collins, Tawni O'Dell, Richard Russo, Bonnie Jo Campbell, Phillip Meyer, and Chris Tusa, I argue, take industrial ruins as a *point of departure* for dramatizing "the postindustrial condition": a consciousness confronted with the stunning realities of living through industrial decline. Whereas industrial ruins prove the generative space of UrbEx digital culture, they signify an ambiguous "closure" for Rust Belt characters who daily face the legacies of industry and deindustrialization.

Rust Belt fiction explores the "postindustrial" as a deceptive, self-defeating condition. While the term registers a definitive break from industrialism as a defining identity, it cannot move beyond it. As author and journalist John Carlin proclaims, "Living in a culture that is post-anything is something of a failure" (qtd. Berger 21). Passively marked by their industrial past, the Rust Belt's literary denizens, I argue, struggle in the conflicted space between factory closure and a lack of psychological closure: an ending but not-ending. Collins's *The Keepers of Truth* (2000), Russo's *Empire Falls* (2001), and Meyer's *American Rust* (2009) all begin with writerly male narrators reflecting on the sight of an abandoned factory, but they cannot see beyond it. The novels do not enter these places.

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[5] Rust Belt landmarks – shuttered factories and boarded-up storefronts in dying industrial towns – appear in John Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), Joshua Mertz and Jayne Anne Phillips's *Machine Dreams* (1984), and Phillip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997).

Contra UrbEx narratives, these literary landscapes do not make history available for the taking. Instead, their ruins are so spectacularly immediate that they block access to the past, foreclosing characters' agency to name what happened. The ruinous conditions of the present become new grounds for explaining what produced them, yielding "dysfunctional narratives" (Baxter 5) that the novels, in Fredric Jameson's words, strive to "contain" (*The Political Unconscious* 242). Yet Rust Belt fiction delineates the postindustrial by denying that deindustrialization offers an accessible narrative that could meaningfully account for the felt experience of decline. The characters' struggle to articulate *what happened* to their town, as well as *how*, and *who is to blame* defines their postindustrial condition as one of disturbing uncertainty.

If Rust Belt fiction raises questions that this genre seems unable to answer or contain, (what happened, how, and who caused the damage?), then activist poetry such as Mark Nowak's *Shut Up Shut Down*, has emerged as an alternative medium for mediating the fractures of the postindustrial experience. Nowak delivers avant-garde poetry with a memory, a "labor history with line breaks" that uses collage techniques to visually and textually render working-class experiences of labor and layoff. In contrast to the narrative closures sought in Rust Belt novels, Mark Nowak visibly disrupts ideological closure. He denies what I call the "post/industrial break" by depicting deindustrialization as the *continued* exploitation and abandonment of (non-)working people. At the same time, he indicts industrial cultures that perpetuate troubling gendered ideologies, masculinist if not also misogynist currents that also permeate UrbEx and Rust Belt texts.

A key term for understanding Nowak's project is "capitalization," the title of the first verse play in *Shut Up*. Capitalization here signifies a systemic process whereby those in power (big business and government) institutionalize their dominance. This power dynamic is inculcated in the working class as unquestioned rules (which Nowak likens to the rules of capitalization in a grammar book).

In *Shut Up*, acts of downsizing, lay-offs, and disinvestment constitute a historically specific mode of capitalization that strips workers of their collective agency. While oral historian Michael Frisch calls deindustrialization a "misleading and antiseptic term" for the "not-so-industrial age" (Rogovin and Frisch 2, 262) the term captures Nowak's notion of a longstanding, formative process (signaled by the suffix "-ization") whereby capitalist decision-makers, in times of prosperity and decline, break down working-class communities (through acts of "de-" forming and "dis-" membering).

Shut Up testifies to the ruinous effects of deindustrialization by "re-mixing" workers' accounts of labor and lay-offs into poetic collages. These collage poems are laced with formal breaks between their quoted voices. However, Nowak draws the reader across these breaks – symbolically transgressing what I call the "post/industrial" break that divides labor history into before-and-after shut-down, or before-and-after ruins. These poetic enjambments reveal an ongoing "capitalization" perpetrated against – and perpetuated by – the working class. Yet, while *Shut Up* addresses the historic process of deindustrialization, Nowak's re-vision of industrial history reveals a crucial gap in his narrative. What can we *do* with his critique of industrialism, which implicates the working class in its own dis-memberment? *Shut Up Shut Down* raises crucial questions of agency – questions that trouble each of my 21st-century case studies. Ultimately, the creative power that Nowak foregrounds belongs not to the workers, whose voices materialize as reified text blocks, but to Nowak himself in his creative assembly-work. Like UrbEx photo-texts and Rust Belt fiction, Nowak temporally brackets industrial labor to the past. By doing so, the artists my project has convened clear a space for themselves to intervene through their own cultural work – made more "authentic" by appropriating the experience of (masculine) manual labor.

My case studies illuminate how ways of naming the worker, the "we," and the ruins have been coded male. Indeed, most of the artists studied and interviewed are men, and the experiences

of deindustrialization they imagine are predominantly male. Empty former worksites have become, I discovered, a catalyst for the artist to express *his* cultural agency in a nostalgic, andro-centric allusion to "hard work." This tendency reveals interesting conceptions of social agency. When the artist performs the role of lost labor, he displaces the workers who really did – and still do – industrial work, for whom this experience is not just a useable aesthetic. What's more, he extends a gender differential that has long divided the working-class community. In selecting my subjects, I do not seek to perpetuate an andro-centric bias, but to highlight this trend as a critical construct. Across my case studies, I query how artists gender both industrial history and decline – and postindustrial success – as a means of processing drastic economic change.

Urban Explorer websites, Rust Belt fiction, and activist poetry offer three different vantages on the Rust Belt, conceiving its historical and contemporary significance through:

- the site/sight of industrial ruins,

- the social condition of being – or being seen as – postindustrial, and

- the historical process of deindustrialization and its (hidden) power dynamics.

Each case study invokes these terms of engagement but privileges one and defines the others from this vantage. Do these terms offer three different entry-points into the shifting figure of the Rust Belt? Do these mediums? I propose these questions as central to my undertaking: how do we name what it is we are investigating when we talk about the Rust Belt? How do our parameters open up or close-off other inquiries? By working through these questions in three case studies, I begin to develop a new paradigm, one that highlights the intersectionality of the site/sight of material culture, identity, and historic processes of transformation. My investigations of Urban Explorer narratives, Rust Belt fiction, and activist poetry serve as local readings. Together they illuminate the Rust Belt as

a unique field of inquiry where the challenges of narrating the history of the present are keenly visible.

Mapping a Field of Inquiry

In the archive of materials I have assembled, my local readings map the Rust Belt in three-dimension (3D) – on x, y, and z axes that situate my sources in relation to ruins, the postindustrial, and deindustrialization (x: a site/sight, y: a social condition, and z: a real-time process). I use my sources' complementary, contradictory, and complicating approaches to map a terrain of inquiry that is amenable to various engagements. I propose this schema to help us rethink the borders not only between disciplinary approaches to the Rust Belt, but also between imaginative and scholarly engagements.

I developed this conceptual scheme through "retrospective prospecting" – looking back on my own engagements with web texts, novels, and collage poetry and conceiving of this existing work as an entry-point into future research.[6] By exploring how Rust Belt culture-workers invest meaning along these three coordinates, I map a previously ill-defined (much-trod but uncharted) field of inquiry. By viewing each of my sources from these perspectives, I offer an analytic key for discerning each one's investment in the Rust Belt. In the following chapter, for example, I illuminate Urban Explorers' understanding of the postindustrial by examining how they conceive of industrial ruins and attend to (or ignore) the lived process of deindustrialization. Rather than approaching my sources from a single disciplinary vantage (e.g., cultural geography, literary history, visual culture studies), my *Rust Belt calculus* emphasizes interrelations. It allows me to locate diverse sources on the

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[6] Thanks to Sara Blair for giving me a term to clarify this move.

same plane – by focusing on one element of my conceptual triptych and gauging how each of my interlocutors defines it. For instance, UrbExers fixate on ruins as their ultimate object of engagement; while Rust Belt fiction treats material ruins as a cipher for the postindustrial condition; and Mark Nowak's poetry uses ruins as a foil for more revelatory oral histories about the violence of deindustrialization. I locate these projects in relation to each other, keeping in mind how each notion of ruins fits into a larger sense of the postindustrial and the importance each assigns to the dynamics of deindustrialization.

My triangulation also illuminates how each text offers a different entry into the Rust Belt and fosters its own consciousness of this *terra infirma*. By mapping different textual engagements along these three coordinates – ruins, the postindustrial, and deindustrialization – I make these terms coextensive rather than using them to impose boundaries between different scholarly and creative approaches. What sort of conceptual terrain could we map by reading Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's photo-book, *The Ruins of Detroit* (2011) alongside Lolita Hernandez's short story collection, *Autopsy of An Engine* (2004), and Rich Feldman and Michael Betzold's *End of the Line: Autoworkers and the American Dream – An Oral History* (1990)? We must acknowledge the unique vantage that a given text or genre takes, but as Mark Nowak suggests, we need to think critically about the ruptures and continuities between different modes and methods of engagement.

Exploring the History of the Present

While I did not intentionally design a 21st-century project, all of my focal texts were posted or published since 2000. This array of recent work examining the ruins of the recent past raises important questions about historical and literary-critical "distance." Walter Benjamin's ideas about the revelatory potential of ruins encourages us to question when they become revelatory. At what

distance (temporally, spatially, and socially) do ruins reveal "truth"?[7] To authenticate their interpretations of industrial history and decline, my subjects claim proximity. They highlight their immersion in sites of (past) labor, their witnessing of industrial fallout, or their kinship with people who worked and lost factory jobs. By contrast, I find myself pressed to establish distance – a sufficient critical distance to legitimate my analysis of my subjects. Exploring the history of the recent past demands a special awareness of scholarly positioning.[8] All of my sources are twenty-first-century texts, which preclude the retrospective clarity afforded by temporal distance. Working in the agile medium of web publishing, Urban Explores close this distance yet more tightly by revising their webpages in real time. Lacking the hindsight afforded by studying the distant past, I also lack a personal distance from many of my subjects – particularly mANVIL, my brother, who is a key informant in my UrbEx chapter. Such proximity to my subjects does not, I believe, compromise my critical inquiry, but rather forces me to remain conscious of the liabilities and affordances of my position as researcher.

My research does not delve deeply in time but aims for a new depth of inquiry – a degree of penetration that critics of UrbEx, Rust Belt fiction, and Mark Nowak's poetry have yet to achieve. Theorists of Urban Exploring tend to generalize. Perhaps taking a cue from the Explorers they survey, these scholars – historians, geographers, and cultural critics – seize on the spectacular aspects of Urban Exploring, performing a shallow archaeology of the practice itself. As Bradley Garrett, an embedded scholar of UrbEx explains, Exploring is itself "a shallow form of discovery" (*Explore Everything* 32). It's the Explorer's personal involvement that lends a depth of meaning to Urban

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[7] Benjamin cites the ruin's revelatory potential: its special capacity to strip away, both literally and figuratively, the façades of capitalist progress. See Graeme Gilloch's *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*, particularly page 110.

[8] Important historiographies have recently emerged to grapple with these limitations and affordances of "doing recent history." See especially Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano's book of the same title: "Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship, and History that Talks Back" (2012), as well as John Toth, "*The Pursuit of History* (2000).

Exploring. "In contrast to a historian working deeply on one topic or site," Garrett affirms, "urban explorers have mental or virtual databases of hundreds of sites, *connected through experience*" (33, emphasis mine).

My privileged access to mANVIL and his extensive database of photo-texts put me in a unique position to investigate the nuances of his experience. Growing up with my brother gave me special insight into his identity formation. By accompanying him on photo-explorations in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Detroit; scouring his *myspace* blog; and tracking the transformation of his photo-texts as they migrated to various social networking sites, I discerned a lingering bravado that I have come to see as a dominant strand of Urban Exploring.[9] Initially, I pursued mANVIL as a subject because he was imminently accessible, but I ultimately chose to write about him because he anchors one end of a spectrum of UrbEx experience. If mANVIL represents the Adventurer's stance, then my second subject – abandonedamerica – anchors the other end of the spectrum in romantic lament.

I located abandonedamerica virtually. Through a series of email exchanges and one face-to-face interview, I gained an intimate understanding of his perception of his work. Although abandonedamerica's photographic style, narrative focus, and commitments differ greatly from

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[9] I base this assessment in research carried out over the past eight years. My archival research began (unexpectedly) in 2006 when I typed "Carrie Furnaces" into Google and discovered Urban Exploring. Since then, more deliberate online searches have led me to hundreds of Urban Explorer websites, with a particular focus on UrbExers who publish both photos and text. In addition to close-reading individual blogs and photo-texts posted to *flickr*, *myspace*, and – increasingly – *facebook*, I have tracked thousands of threads on the Urban Explorer Resource (UER) web forum. In 2008 I began a series of ethnographic interviews culminating in a typological study of Urban Exploring, which I submitted for a graduate course on "Urban Imaginaries." I located interviewees through online searches and email queries, as well as my brother's personal connections. Between 2 April and 10 July, 2008, I conducted 18 interviews by phone and email, using pre-circulated questions tailored to each Explorer's posts. These interviews were "semi-structured," with most quickly transitioning to free-flowing conversations about the Explorer's motivations, photographic style, investment in written narratives, and personal exploits in abandoned buildings (Newton 1). I conducted several follow-up interviews in 2010, via email and in-person at an Explorer gathering in Baltimore. In December of 2010 I accompanied a group of five UrbExers to Detroit, where I observed their photo-explorations and conducted ad hoc interviews focusing on their compositional choices. A second Explorer meet-up in 2011 afforded me the opportunity to interview six other Explorers, and a tour of the Watts Campbell steam engine factory in March 2012 introduced me to ten more individuals eager to share their experiences in group conversation.

mANVIL's, I recognized both Explorers as digerati drawn to a sublime aura of labor in industrial

ruins. They both romanticize masculine industrial labor, but from different vantages; while

abandonedamerica romanticizes the loss of history through deindustrialization, mANVIL

romanticizes his own recuperation of masculine heroics through ruins exploration. My first chapter

close-reads these Explorers in tandem, highlighting their distinct styles in order to establish a

spectrum of experience for a key demographic of these modern cultural interpreters of ruin.

Local Readings

Chapter 1: Staging the Rust Belt: Regarding Urban Explorers' Post-Industrial Productions

This chapter investigates the web culture of Urban Explorers who make industrial

abandonments their personal, photographic territory. Following a historical overview of UrbEx, I

examine two case-studies in the works of abandonedamerica (now posting as Matthew Christopher)

and mANVIL. By first delving into the culture's critically neglected history, I re-define Urban

Exploring as a conjunction of embodied spatial experience and photographic seeing. When UrbEx

shifted from its early focus on "Adventuring" through off-limits places to publishing photo-texts

fixated on "ruins," abandoned buildings became the crucial *sight* of their engagement. As the

photograph took ascendancy over written accounts, that is, Explorers turned their photographic

vision on the past – the ruined landscape they have conceived as a lost world of work. Rather than

feeling diminished by industrial decay, however, Explorers use this landscape as raw material for

self-making. Invoking his firsthand encounters with ruins to validate his own aesthetic vision and

versions of industrial history, mANVIL's myspace posts demonstrate how UrbExers have

appropriated industrial ruins as elaborate stage-sets and – through their digital narratives –

performed the role of workers at different phases of the buildings' history. Yet, while mANVIL fashions himself after an intrepid masculine laborer, abandonedamerica identifies with factories themselves, divested of their use-value and dignity by abandonment.

Both Explorers identify the wasted industrial landscape with a romanticized vision of the worker that, I argue, reflects their selective historical consciousness. abandonedamerica imagines laid-off workers as victims, while mANVIL heroizes the masculine manual laborer. For all their similarities, mANVIL and abandonedamerica respond to their personalized visions of work in distinct ways. Through photo-processing effects, abandonedamerica transforms derelict buildings into art objects, and in this way makes defunct factories productive for himself. abandonedamerica. perceives that his own creative work can "salvage" abandoned buildings by redeeming them through his images – transforming his audience's perception. For his part, mANVIL plays out his adventures as the inheritor of industrial modernity's quintessential masculine labor. Like the industrial workers they reimagine, abandonedamerica and mANVIL are "producers." abandonedamerica produces a piece of art (the building becomes a portrait), while mANVIL produces his own site-specific performances. In both cases, the creative, physical "work" that their photo-texts carry forward is their own, enhanced by the aura of work lingering in industrial ruins. In their similarities and differences, these artists provoke questions about the ethics of re-valuing present ruins as usable pasts.

Chapter 2: Creative Destruction *with a Vengeance*: Displacing Blame in Rust Belt Fiction

This chapter expands on the heretofore regional definition of Rust Belt fiction, while laying special emphasis on grotesque portraits of postindustrial communities. Reading Michael Collins's *The Keepers of Truth* (2000) and Richard Russo's *Empire Falls* (2001), I present new parameters for reading Rust Belt fiction as a search for narrative closure. Collins and Russo weld disparate genres in

order to express the complex realities of living in – or *as* – industrial ruins. Drawing on Jameson's theories of narrative compensation, I posit an industrial unconscious through which Russo's protagonist processes submerged histories of industrial ruination. In so doing, I explore how Rust Belt fiction responds to the displacement of industrial labor through displaced narratives that target gender as a site of blame.

Turning to *The Keepers of Truth* as a socially-engaged thriller, I focus on Collins's trope of dismemberment. Through intra-family and -community violence, Collins distills the social consequences of deindustrialization by mapping them murderously onto working-class bodies. By translating social dis-memberment – the fracture of a town's collective industrial identity – into bodily dismemberment, Collins dramatizes the way Rust Belt communities internalize the violence of factory closure. His work raises questions about how capitalist powers continue to operate after industry has apparently fled, and how gender dynamics, labor power, and class conflict get reconfigured in the absence of the industries that shaped them. Pursuing this inquiry lays bare how scenes of dismemberment work allegorically in Collins's text. Against the backdrop of industrial ruins, Rust Belt fiction reproduces the violence of industrial labor displaced from its capitalist catalysts.

Chapter 3: Bridging the Post/Industrial Break in Mark Nowak's *Shut Up Shut Down*

My final chapter demonstrates how contradictions permeating Mark Nowak's 2004 poetry collection, *Shut Up Shut Down*, reveal a persistent tension between the aesthetic and the political at the site of ruins. I begin with an incongruity overlooked by scholars: the tonal contradiction between *Shut Up*'s honorific verse plays and its ambivalent, even vilifying, portrayals of industrial masculinity in his photo-text poems. Nowak's subtle critiques of working-class subjects prove critical to both

16

appreciating and questioning the significance of his work in an activist context. Reading the intra-textual relations between Nowak's photography and poetic verse, I argue that by de-aestheticizing the postindustrial landscape, he performs an analytic shift, one that leads readers from contemplating architectural decay to questioning the causes and human consequences of deindustrialization. As I trace these questions across the "post/industrial break" – a perceived historical rupture that Nowak scholarship perpetuates – I demonstrate how the working-class ruins depicted in Nowak's photos indict a neoliberal alliance of business and government reaching back to the heyday of industrial productivity. Nowak's textual collages – placed in relation to these photos – further remind readers that corporations exploited the working class long before shut-down. Yet, where such collages identify (white male) industrial workers not only as victims but victimizers, *Shut Up* renders them complicit in the dis-memberment of the working class.

Such contradictions extend to Nowak's self-proclaimed project. While his poetry aims to restore a labor history displaced by hyper-visible ruins (and spectacular ruins photography), it does so largely through a lyric appropriation of workers' words – a type of found language – that recalls Urban Explorers' appropriation of found objects. I demonstrate how Nowak's fragmented documentary style actually aligns him with the forces of "fracture, collapse, and disintegration" that he censures, thereby undermining his larger project of rallying collective working-class consciousness. By giving only sparse clues to his engagement with his source texts, Nowak occludes the very history that his critical/creative labor seeks to restore.

Chapter 1 – Staging the Rust Belt:
Regarding Urban Explorers' Post-Industrial Productions

A Rooftop View of Urban Exploring

In "Walking in the City," Michel de Certeau defines the metropolis by its dialectic of spatial extremes. From his famous vantage point on the World Trade Center overlooking New York, Certeau surveys a city that "has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts." Noting the striking contrasts that interlink the city, Certeau sees New York as a jarring conglomerate of "yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trashcans" and "today's urban irruptions that block out its space." "On this stage of concrete, steel and glass," Certeau fantasizes about what he calls the "ordinary practitioners of the city," those myriad actors caught up in the maze of "administrative circuits" mapped out below him (91). Within the panoptic urban system, these people exercise "surreptitious creativities" (96). They are actors who, Certeau contends, perform a "spatial acting-out of place" according to where they venture and how they choose to get there (98). Unwittingly, they engage in a transgressive poetics of peregrination that eludes visibility. Empowered by their choices of movement, the "ordinary practitioners of the city," claims Certeau, can "actualize" sectors of the urban grid or "condemn certain places to inertia or disappearance" (98, 99).

Figure 1.1: mANVIL. "power48." In "Myself & others." Photograph. *flickr*. 21 Oct. 2007. Web. Accessed: https://www.flickr.com/photos/manvil/2175812385/in/set-72157604958420777. 30 Sept. 2013. Photograph.

Urban Explorers have a word for watching the city from above: "roof-topping." But they would not bother looking down to the city from the public space of a skyscraper, as Certeau does. An UrbExer would tell Certeau to try roof-topping one of the buildings "already transformed into trashcans." These discarded sites are the Urban Explorers' destinations of choice. More deliberate than Certeau's "ordinary practitioners of the city," UrbExers seek out exactly "those places condemned to inertia or disappearance." Fueled by a fascination with off-limits buildings and infrastructures, they traverse decommissioned subway tunnels, abandoned hospitals, and industrial ruins to see and experience these wastescapes for themselves. Unlike Certeau's ordinary practitioners, who "blind[ly]" engage in "surreptitious creativities," Urban Explorers actively defy property restrictions, but they would not be on Certeau's radar (93). Having "pre-dawned" their destinations, they would be long-gone by the time he surveyed the city.

Sixteen years after Certeau, Antoine Picon noted the persistent polarity of urban space, but situated the disjuncture in a postindustrial context. In American cities, he contends, the "face-off" between "shopping center" and "garbage dump" (a metaphor for the wastescape left by industrial obsolescence) shapes the contemporary city (75, 67, 74). Yet, as Picon affirms in "Anxious Landscapes," artists take possession of the disturbing urban scene by transforming it into a personal vision. At the nexus of "Anxious Landscapes" and "Walking in the City" I locate the evolving subculture of Urban Explorers (or UrbExers). In this chapter I argue that UrbExers combine the tactics of artist and interloper to revalue the debris of industrial closure.

UrbExers eschew the controlled space of "the shopping center," instead trekking across the country and traveling abroad to photograph yesterday's decrepit (and now off-limits) buildings. Following their investigations of disused, discarded – but still privately owned – places, UrbExers realize their creative agency by publishing artistic web-texts dramatizing their immersion in this "other" landscape. Although Certeau could not have traced their exploratory paths on the ground, he could look them up online. Urban Exploring begins with a covert transgression, but it climaxes in a self-conscious performance photographically rendered on the web. UrbExers avoid getting caught on-location, but they actively seek an audience online where they post under pseudonyms. Their poetics of peregrination is meant to be appreciated – seen and hopefully applauded – at a safe distance from their exploring territory; that is, on the vicarious stage of their websites, where Urban Exploration becomes a self-conscious and site-specific performance. The practitioners of UrbEx script industrial ruins to say what they want them to say and rehearse new identities for themselves within these (former) spaces of work. As deindustrialization ravages local economies and jettisons more buildings from the capitalist grid, UrbExers gain new ground. Amidst factory ruins and the collateral damage of industrial decline – schools, churches, hotels, and theaters abandoned to decay – Urban Exploring thrives in creative transgression. As this creativity plays out in defunct industrial

20

worksites, it encourages us to think about how, in the absence of work, these former landscapes of labor become stage-sets that inspire the physical and creative efforts of a digital generation. Disinvestment literally clears a space for UrbExers to intervene, as if picking up where work left off.

Urban Explorers are not conventional city-dwellers, nor typical tourists.[1] Fascinated by disused and dilapidated architecture, they pass their free time in some of the most stigmatized cities in America. In *Voices of Decline*, Robert Beauregard writes that "urban decline is a tragedy, but also an opportunity." Specifically, he sees "the decay of the city" as an opportunity to redeem its excesses (284). As post-industrial opportunists, UrbExers treat disinvestment and the decay of once thriving cities as an opportunity for their own personal redemption. A 34-year-old construction manager who goes by the name of Don Corleyone boasted to me that his favorite city is Gary, Indiana. Armed with cameras, he and a group of friends – some met online, some in abandoned buildings – spent the dark morning hours of the 2010 Christmas weekend photographing one of this steel-city's moldering churches. These Explorers eagerly spend their vacation-time in the bitter cold, hiding from metal-scrappers, and risking their safety amidst crumbling infrastructure. (In 2006 an UrbExer named devnull died from injuries sustained while photographing the Gary City Church). When asked why they venture through abandonments, their oft-cited responses were: photos (art), the

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[1] The broader phenomenon of UrbEx also includes night-time infiltration of active (as opposed to abandoned) sites, "draining" (exploring underground drains and tunnels), and "summiting," or climbing bridges, and construction cranes. UrbEx is a loosely configured culture, difficult to generalize. In my online research and interviews (first conducted in 2008 for a project entitled *Through a Lens Darkly: Urban Explorers Validate the Disused, Discarded, and Decrepit*) I found that its practitioners are not chiefly "white middle-class youth between the ages of fifteen and thirty (as Steven High typecasts them in *Corporate Wasteland* [42]). Instead, they span a range of professions and ages – between 19 and 54 among my interviewees. Nevertheless, the culture consists overwhelmingly of men. These individuals profess overlapping and contradictory motivations, all united by a fascination with the off-limits built environment and a desire to photograph it and share this vision online. With its internal variations, UrbEx is a world-wide network with participants founding clubs and forums, organizing "Explorer-paloozas," and creating zines based on shared sensibilities regarding the marginal, buried, closed-off, shut-down, seldom seen spaces of the constructed landscape.

chance to experience unique places from a disappearing age (history), and the adventure of going where most people will never tread (exceptional experience).

These weekend rogues revel in the opportunity to spend their free time – hundreds of hours over a period of years – in cities linked with crime, joblessness, and rampant decay. Cultural geographers John Jakle and David Wilson argue that systematic disinvestment breeds poverty and stagnation, transforming formerly productive landscapes into "contagions" (178). In line with this pathologizing narrative, social commentators voice a fear that Rust Belt decay will envelop America.[2] Antoine Picon corroborates the disquieting power of these "anxious landscapes." In contrast to the crumbling masonry of ancient and Romantic ruins, he insists, dilapidated industry produces a particularly unsettling response: it signals the failure of a defining technological triumph. "The ruin…restores man to nature," while rust "confines him in the middle of his creations as within a prison, a prison all the more terrible since he is the builder" (79). While stone belongs to nature – is merely borrowed from it – steel (and the buildings associated with our preeminent industrial era) signifies nature transformed through ingenuity into an enduring testament to American progress. When the Empire State Building was erected in 1930, "it was intuitive for Lewis W. Hine to heroize the steelworkers [in his *Men At Work* images] because their medium, load-bearing steel, was recognized by then as a redemptively brilliant modern material, propelling civilization into the clouds" (Smith 46). Confronting us with the failure of this mythic material, industrial ruins suggest "the death of humanity in the midst of the signs of its triumph over nature" (Picon 79). As such, Picon argues, industrial wreckage bears no identity as a romantic "trace," but only "waste" (77). Whereas the Romantics' agrarian landscape was outmoded by encroaching industrial technology,

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[2] See Jonathan Veitch, "Colossus in Ruins: Remembering Pittsburgh's Industrial Past" (1997); John Patrick Leary, "Detroitism: What does 'ruin porn' tell us about the motor city, ourselves, and other American cities?" (2011); Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, "Dismantling Detroit" (2012).

industrial ruins have not been "surpassed" by an advanced, albeit hazardous, new regime of production. In fact, the products from America's heyday of heavy industry – ships, planes, and cars; steel-based infrastructure; electric power – remain fundamental to urban society. Therefore, the architectural fallout of heavy industry in America testifies not to functional obsolescence but a failure to mobilize this technology effectively. The anxiety instilled by industrial ruins reflects the powerlessness to imagine a future beyond them.

As a testament to their alternative relationship to the built environment, UrbExers refuse to submit to the declension narrative, all too familiar since the Great Recession of 2008 and well before. Instead of feeling constrained or dejected by structural decay and its social ramifications, they find rejuvenation in rust. Thoroughly opportunistic, Urban Explorers appropriate the material residua of failed economies as an arena for authentic experience. Their romantic and gendered authenticity claims will receive close attention in two case studies. However, because Urban Exploring is a relatively new phenomenon, my chapter will proceed with a history of the pastime. I explore what constitutes UrbEx spatial praxis and how the dynamics of the online community, along with contending theoretical claims, shape the selectively historical project of Urban Exploring. The evolution of this transformed practice arises, I argue, from the critically neglected pastime of Urban Adventuring. How does the precursory practice of Adventuring paired with the dynamics of digital narrative shape UrbEx tactics and commitments? By close-reading photo-texts from two different websites, I question how UrbExers with distinct styles and motivations insert themselves into a personally gratifying vision of industrial history.

For Urban Explorers, abandoned (industrial) buildings are material sites of engagement, which they transform into artistic sights transposed to their own webpages. They re-use the past to fashion personas and perform identities that reflect their selective historical consciousness of

23

industrial labor. Selecting aspects of history that serve their personal vision, they crop the rest from their photo-texts. Within the online community, these "firsthand" narratives validate the Explorer's historic interpretations, aesthetic vision, and agency.

Location, Location, Location

Are Urban Explorers romantically self-absorbed abandonment-hunters? Citing their fetishization of "primitive" spaces," Steven High argues that UrbExers "mystif[y] former industrial sites," effectively "stripping [them] of their history and their geography just as surely as the departing companies, entrepreneurs, and trophy hunters stripped the sites of their assets (*Corporate Wasteland* 57, 60). Yet from Geographer-turned-Urban-Explorer Bradley Garrett's perspective, UrbExers, through their "resilient personal attachments," perform a cultural revaluation of places dismissed as blight (*Assaying History* 1048). Does Urban Exploring elevate the local community – that is, bring the decayed "ruins" into greater public view and so engender strategies for removing it? Or, in validating "blighted" areas as historic sites worthy of photographic attention, do UrbExers merely validate their own exceptional vision and actually profit from blight by marketing it in their photos?

Although UrbEx has attracted a range of participants – from 20-somethings to the middle-aged, from the unemployed to high-powered professionals – most Explorers are not immediately affected by the economics of deindustrialization. They frequent "depressed" towns by choice, not because they live or work there.[3] Approaching industrial ruins from an outsider's perspective, they come and go as they please – venturing into unfamiliar territory, and returning with "evidence" of

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[3] Though, some UrbExers, such as "urban explorer extraordinaire" Julia Solis, have settled – at least part time – in the Rust Belt; her house in Detroit is a hub for Urban Explorers. See TunnelBug, "Exploring a Defunct Detroit Steel Factory" (2011).

what they have seen. Because they engage photographically with the Rust Belt, they can afford to look, then look away. And because their livelihoods do not immediately depend on the health of American industry (in fact, Explorers who sell their photos require its continuing ruin), photographic exploration opens a new terrain of possibility. Instead of closing off a viable future, abandonment offers what many Explorers construe as a literal entry into America's recent historical past.

Urban Exploration begins with an event and ends in a vision: a surreptitious sojourn into industrial ruins culminates with a vision of the past persisting through disuse, partial demolition, and natural decay. Many Explorers "pre-dawn" their locations, arriving before daybreak to avoid suspicious neighbors, caretakers, or security guards. [4] These furtive tactics prove necessary because, although their destinations are "abandoned," they remain private property. To photograph these places, UrbExers transgress cultural norms designating appropriate leisure activities and transgress legal restrictions for occupying space. In their lexicon, "abandoned" is a paradoxical term, because most abandonments are both neglected and monitored. Explorers have to exercise their ingenuity to bypass obstacles such as barbed wire, guard dogs, alarm systems, and caretakers. Depending on the building's security profile, Explorers risk being reprimanded, arrested, or even shot, but they empower themselves to trespass for the sake of their mission. These tensions charge their activity with a certain thrill; adrenaline heightens the Explorer's senses, preparing him for an immersive

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[4] "Location" is the generic term UrbExers use in reference to the places they investigate and photograph. It recalls the news media expression "on location," which suggests the authority of a reporter's account based on her proximity to the scene. It also encompasses the range of structures many UrbExers visit, including bridges and tunnels, which one would not necessarily identify as "buildings." More subtly, UrbExers' use of the term "location" suggests their lack of familiarity with the towns and communities whose structures they photograph. Many Explorers have hundreds of buildings in their portfolio. Their photographic territory often spans not only cities, but states, countries, and continents. (Whereas only two of the twenty-six UrbExers I interviewed in 2008 had ever explored abroad, in 2011 almost half have made photography trips overseas.) As Explorers, or tourists, rather than residents, they must locate their destinations (via satellite map) and travel to them (using GPS coordinates). Nevertheless, "location" proves an ironic choice of terms, since UrbExers take buildings as their object of analysis, to the exclusion of their unique local context.

investigation of place.[5] The physical demands of Urban Exploring rouse an intense self-awareness through sensual, embodied experience. Coupled with the "feat" of successfully penetrating a building, this triumphant self-consciousness undergirds the Explorer's intrepid identity. Within the UrbEx community, such hard-won encounters lend status and authority to the Explorer's interpretive vision.

Although many of these places are actively inhabited by homeless people, drug dealers, scrappers, or partyers, they become depopulated ruins in the Explorer's photographic vision. One mode of engagement gets erased, another takes its place. The best locations are those considered "untouched" since abandonment and are therefore filled with "artifacts" that seductively allude to the building's "original" life. UrbExers study material traces and closely attend to their own sensual responses – to smells, sounds, and textures – unaccustomed in the regulated spaces of the city. This stage in the process represents a self-conscious firsthand encounter with a (former) space of lived experience. Even when Explorers travel in groups, they spend most of their time in silence, each following their own paths through a building or campus, photographing what strikes them – like children engaging in parallel play.

UrbExers conclude their clandestine spatial experiences by publishing their photos online. Some painstakingly photoshop their best images before uploading them to the web via photo-sharing, social networking, or personal websites, in addition to forums dedicated to Urban Exploring in specific regions.[6] Forums function as a meeting ground where individuals can self-identify as

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[5] What separates Urban Exploration from previous traditions of industrial ruins photography, such as Bernd and Hilla Bechers' structural typologies and Camilo José Vergara's time-lapse studies of urban neighborhood decay, is the Explorers' entry into the buildings they photograph. Explorers' web galleries combine exterior shots with a variety of interior views including close-ups of found objects and textures of decay.
[6] The North American Urban Exploration Resource, or UER, is the most frequented forum with more than 18,000 members as of 2007 (Nestor 3). For the generation of Explorers that I have interviewed, activity on the forums peaked in the mid-2000s.

Urban Explorers, creating a personalized web moniker linked with their Explorer personas. They submit photos for critique or display the products of their labor to elicit the praise of their peers. By responding to photos and discussion threads posted by other Explorers, they develop new contacts as they shape their online persona.

Photographs remain the centerpiece of the online UrbEx culture. The web audience demands first and foremost to see. As Curious George, a 25-year-old rail mechanic recounted, "The people who gave me initial support and who gave me some advice about exploring ultimately helped me get into photography as they were getting sick of reading my recaps and wanting to see visual evidence of these places" (Interview). The web community of Urban Explorers values photographs as the most direct art. It is therefore the most useful for transmitting a vision of architectural ruin in all its visible material richness.

While some of the more prolific Urban Explorer increasingly seek recognition as embedded historians, most Urban Explorers do not write extensively; instead they rely on their photographs' visual interest to lend them online status. The culture has developed its own criteria of value: the most revered Urban Explorers discover, or "validate," "new" locations, capture these places in technically sophisticated photographs, and deliver a "write-up" listing researched facts and/or dramatizing the risk and danger of accessing abandoned buildings.[7] Based on their photos, UrbExers can build a following online, extending their social circle and opportunities for "shooting" new places. Explorers who admire each other's work coordinate via PMs (personal messages, not visible

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[7] In the language of UrbEx forums, "validating" a building means claiming new territory. To validate a building, an UrbExer must be the first member of the online community to photograph it since abandonment. Locating a previously un-validated building raises the Explorer's status and ensures that his photos are unique – the new benchmark from which any other Explorer who visits that site must distinguish his vision. The recognition conferred on the place by the UrbExer's web audience doubles as honorific recognition of the Explorer's physical and artistic prowess in locating, infiltrating, and artistically documenting this building.

to the public) to swap locations, with each Explorer acting as a tour guide to his or her familiar terrain.

Through internet connections, these social networks traverse continents. Urban Exploration has become a global community, based in a shared fascination for the ruins of industrial modernity. Some of the most iconic Urban Explorers on the web travel internationally to photograph their preferred genre of ruins. For example, kowalski, a Canadian graduate student of landscape architecture who is known for his "light painting" of abandoned hydroelectric plants and underground tailraces, is a luminary among Urban Explorers, while dsankt (short for "desanctified"), an Australian IT contractor who is also in his early 30s, has become renowned for precarious long-exposure shots: active railway tunnels, the apex of high-traffic bridges, the roofs of central-city monuments, and the scaffolds supporting massive turbine halls. International exploration provides another means to indicate status within this community. These Explorers become sought-after minor celebrities who transform industrial ruins into a mechanism for building self-esteem and fostering a sense of community, thereby inverting the social and psychological ramifications typically associated with deindustrialization.

Explorer Historians

Having built a sizable following online and off-beat credibility from their "unmediated," on-the-ground inquiries, some UrbExers become professionalized in academic and art circles by staging gallery shows and lecturing on industrial history and technology. They are adopting and adapting art historical and museum practices and transforming them. Hip, underground, and alternative, their histories partake of the authenticity vested in direct encounters with derelict and dangerous buildings. Intriguingly, as they gain more direct experience in ruins, UrbExers with a penchant for

28

writing increasingly abandon personal emotive and adventuresome narratives in favor of historical research. As they develop their photographic style, they re-contextualize their visual project and their own role regarding "structurally magnificent," "historically significant" places threatened by demolition and neglect (Nickel). Anchoring their images in factual research about the form, function, use, and the circumstances surrounding closure, their websites evoke an epistemological authority based on "fact" as well as personal experience. While Anthony J. Fassi makes the valid, if general, point that today's Urban Explorers are "among the few who contribute to the visibility of postindustrial landscapes and, by extension, the visual history of deindustrialization," he neglects both the *textual* impetus of Urban Exploring as well as the manner in which seasoned UrbExers have shifted their narrative identity to align it with more familiar curative practices and historical claims (148-49). Despite many of their stated intentions, these Explorers do not provide a visual catalogue of industrial decay; they transform themselves and the landscape as well through hybrid narratives that combine image and text, historical fact and personal narrative.

Authorizing themselves to penetrate and photograph the marginalized built environment – "other" spaces, outside of most people's personal experience – UrbExers authenticate their personas as Explorers. By contextualizing their projects as *work* – preservation photography, historical documentary, or artistic redemption – they invest their transgressive pursuits with cultural legitimacy. For example, kowalski is considered the "real deal…a true explorer": he risks his life to photographically map the underground drain system in Canada and the Northern U.S. (Nailhead). Through strategic flash-lighting and long photographic exposures, kowalski portrays the mundane infrastructure of water conduits as an esoteric, otherworldly space. Pairing these ethereal images with write-ups revealing a detailed understanding of decommissioned hydroelectric power plants, he claims his territory in a way that exceeds romantic exploring or unconventional exploits (Cook

2006). kowalski evinces authority grounded not only in physical prowess and artistic sensibility, but also in commitment to history.

By demonstrating historical knowledge, UrbExers seek to distance themselves from so-called "ruins fetishists." Indeed, many of the individuals I call "Urban Explorers" disdain this title because of its association with point-and-click abandonment hunters and purveyors of ruins porn – those criticized for exploiting the devastation of local communities by aestheticizing economic failure.[8] For instance, kowalski's recent changes to his website suggest that while expressing (excessive) emotion can undermine an Explorer's project, historical facts confer legitimacy. After his 2010 arrest for trespassing in the Niagara tailrace, kowalski overhauled his website. Specifically, he deleted an ode to the demolished R.L. Hearn Generating Station. Foregrounding his lyrical subjectivity, kowalski expressed that "a spirit retreated to the rafters when the wreckers came in, [though] we drank the magic light and it slipped into our blood, and nothing of this place will ever be the same."[9] Replacing this poem with "articles" reporting on the Station's construction and histories of ownership, kowalski revises the significance of his encounter. History trumps poetry as the more legitimate discourse. Coming so soon after his arrest, these revisions signal kowalski's self-conscious turn towards a more "reputable" narrative persona.

Textual Adventurers, Visual Explorers, Hybrid Histories

The term "Urban Exploration," was first coined in 1996 by Ninjalicious, a Canada-based UrbExer, cited consistently as the phenomenon's spokesman by scholars who have published on

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[8] See Leary's "Detroitism" (2011) as the seminal critique of Detroit-based "ruin porn."

[9] Kowalski. "The Vanishing Point: *Power Generation,* R.L. Hearn Generating Station, Toronto, Ontario." 3 March 2008. Web. [This webpage no longer exists.] Accessed: www.vanishingpoint.ca/hearn.html. 7 July 2008.

Urban Exploration.[10] In his *Infiltration: the zine about going places you're not supposed to go*, (first vanity-published in print but shortly launched on the web), "Ninj" offered a play-by-play of "expeditions" by himself and his cohort to "infiltrate" the off-limits built environment of active buildings, abandonments, and utility tunnels ("Practice"). Each expedition log offered navigational tips and included several photographs: mostly scanned photos of warning signs (clearly flouted) and access points such as stairs, broken windows, and manholes. These sparse, low-resolution illustrations – a noteworthy contrast to the stylized architectural and landscape photography of contemporary UrbEx – underscore how much has changed since Ninj's time.

In 2005, two months before he died from cancer at the age of 31, Ninjalicious published *Access All Areas: A User's guide to the art of urban exploration,* a comprehensive manual for scouting, preparing, and executing an expedition. Detailing the physical process of Exploring, the book also includes a "best of" series of *Infiltration* write-ups as models for narrating these trips. His book codifies a heterogeneous practice, but one he had a personal hand in organizing as a web culture. While his book articulates historical, artistic, and photo-preservationist motives for Exploring, these do not materialize in his own model-narratives.

Theorists outside the Exploring scene lean on *Access All Areas* as a textual authority, yet as Urban Explorers are a loose-knit crew with myriad styles and motivations, Ninj exists more as a transitional figure than a representative of what UrbEx has become. Since *Access All Areas* was published, Urban Exploration has evolved from dramatic adventure stories peppered with illustrative photos to art photography framed by historic research. Yet, as digitally-savvy Urban

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[10] See Dylan Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason* (2006); Len Albright, "I Wish That Was Abandoned! Exploring Meaning in Abandoned Buildings" (2007); Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland* (2007); Anthony J. Fassi, "Industrial Ruins, Urban Exploring, and the Postindustrial Picturesque" (2010); Garrett, "Assaying History" (2011).

Explorers fashion themselves into vernacular historians with an extensive readership, they nevertheless demonstrate vestigial characteristics of an earlier culture: Urban Adventuring (or UA).

The following section thus offers a brief overview of the origins of UrbEx web culture in Adventuring: a transgressive, personally transformative spatial practice that continues to shape UrbExers' historical consciousness in previously unexplored ways. It is critical to understand the distinctions and continuities between UrbEx and UA, especially UrbEx's transition to photographic seeing which, I argue, launched UrbEx into the domain of historical documentary work. Explorers proudly reiterate that most people dismiss abandoned buildings as wreckage and blight, "or they drive past an industrial location or have an asylum near them and maybe think, 'that's a shame,' but then they go about their lives" (Interview). In contrast, Urban Explorers personally investigate industrial ruins and produce a vision of place for their audience – a vision shaped by the Explorer's spatial experience and artistic sensibilities.

A recent wave of professional Detroit-based ruins photography has brought critical and commercial attention to the branch of UrbExers who specialize in industrial ruins.[11] Urban Exploration is now most often associated with abandoned buildings. However, Urban Explorers do not limit themselves to the decaying built environment. For the subset of Explorers who frequents disused and depopulated buildings, these abandonments weren't always regarded as ruins – places belonging to a vanishing or vanquished past. They were, according to Ninjalicious, *spaces where you're not supposed to go*: the forbidden zones of the contemporary city (*Access all Areas* 33).

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[11] Notable examples are Dan Austin and Sean Doerr, *Lost Detroit: Stories Behind the Motor City's Majestic Ruins* (2010) and Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *The Ruins of Detroit* (2011).

Figure 1.**2**: Marchand, Yves and Romain Meffre. "The Tragedy of Detroit." Photograph. *Time: Special Report*. Web. 5 Oct. 2009. Accessed: http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20091005,00.html. 15 Aug. 2011. Photograph.

The cultural phenomenon of Urban Exploring has its origins in space rather than place. "If we think of space as that which allows movement," as Yi-Fu Tuan maintains, "then place is pause" (6). The pause emblematized by the photograph, I will argue, transformed the forbidden spaces of Adventuring into endangered *places*, recovered from neglect by the Explorer's determined attention. This crucial turn from Adventuring to photo-exploration has escaped scholarly attention. When theorists and reporters define UrbEx, they typically cite Ninjalicious as a textual authority, neglecting his own pre-digital precursors. Taken amidst thousands of UrbExers who post pictures with little commentary, Ninj's book is a facile source for non-Explorers; he acts as a type of self-appointed spokesman detailing the practice. An "internal-commentator," as well as the writer who coined the phrase "Urban Exploring, Ninjalicious appears a valuable resource for writers outside of Explorer culture. While scholars have recourse to Ninj's book, most contemporary Urban Explorers have

never read it. All but one of the UrbExers I've interviewed over the past six years have heard of Ninjalicious, but they do not identify with him. Instead they find their own emblematic figures in the current UrbEx scene. Because *Infiltration* dates back to the mid-1990s, when UrbEx took off with the Internet, Ninjalicious functions as a conveniently articulate originator. When scholars look back before Ninjalicious on the UrbEx timeline, they usually situate the practice in relation to a more distant pre-history: eighteenth-century Parisian cataphiles, the Dadaists, or a group of MIT student "building hackers" in the 1950s. Scholars have critically overlooked a more recent context for Urban Exploring: the pre-internet phenomenon of Urban Adventuring (UA). How, then, did the transgressive spatial practice of UA shape how Urban Explorers produce industrial history and limn the postindustrial condition at the site/sight of industrial ruins?

Adventuring, still a common practice, involves accessing – or infiltrating – forbidden zones of the city. Urban Adventurers extend their personal territory along the Y axis of the city, venturing above and below the sanctioned X axis of the streets. Also known as city spelunking and urban mountaineering, Urban Adventuring reclaims the built environment as an exhilarating frontier space. A close cousin to parkour, it approaches infrastructure as a physical challenge.[12] Participants transform the urban grid into a topographical playground by scaling the facades of buildings-, bridges-, and cranes-cum-mountains and crawling through drainage tunnels as if they were caves. Instead of investigating sites as "places," Adventurers divest them of their cultural identity, treating these sites as structures and spaces to be conquered. Moreover, Adventurers tended not to publish accounts of their own experiences, and often did not capture or narrate them in any material form, opting instead for an in-the-moment, exhilarating sensual experience. As Max Action, founding

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[12] In the sport of parkour (a derivative of the French "le parcours du combatant," a military obstacle course), participants test their physical agility by creating "short-cuts" through the built environment. Climbing lampposts, leaping over staircases, and balancing on handrails, parkour enthusiasts, also known as "traceurs," *trace* more efficient, alternative paths through city-space.

member of Minneapolis Urban Adventures remarked upon the launch of his Adventuring/UrbEx website in 2000, "Action Squad's activities do not lend themselves well to photography. Cameras are one more piece of equipment to lug around" ("Mineral Research Resource Center"). UA was (and is) an experience of transgression and discovery (and these ideas travel forward), with little emphasis on transmitting narratives to a larger audience. The Adventuring archives, particularly pre-Internet, are therefore scant: print materials are hard to locate, and photos of Adventurers' physical exploits are even rarer.[13]

The (Digital) Emergence of a Ruins-Centric Culture

In the early-to-mid 1990s, as the Internet became accessible to a wider public, Urban Adventurers began to go online to share their stories. Through these networking capabilities, UA developed from a predominantly individualist practice into a movement consisting of individual sites, group publications, and web rings. Groups such as "infiltrators," "drainers," and "[construction] crane climbers" were thus linked, yet these websites remained mostly textual. Internet bandwidth at this time could not accommodate dense photo-graphics even if the physical

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[13] Existing materials include *Il Draino*, the Cave Clan newsletter parodying the minutes of a speleological society, and Alan S. North's *Urban Adventure Handbook*. North describes UA as an improvised alternative to nature sports for thrill seekers "making do" in the city. "The structured, asphalt-and-concrete, developed world," North affirms, "will become your wilderness playground" (2). In the mid-1990s, Urban Adventurer Wes Modes adapted North's tract for a more self-consciously transgressive purpose. In his practice it became a self-righteous act of defiance: "for those who feel hemmed in and hen-pecked by the rules and restrictions of our over-protective, authoritarian western society. It is for everyone who wants to break out, thumb their nose at authority, and fart in the general direction of governments, corporations and convention" ("world wide urban adventure resources"). In a local-interest piece in *Metro Santa Cruz*, Modes describes his "transcendent" personal experience infiltrating and climbing "the tallest building in town." The only image in the piece is a posed portrait of Modes balancing between two walls, and the only descriptions of the building are subjective responses to space – the extravagance of "a big, big room, large enough for the world's highest game of half-court basketball." Drawn to the voluminous spaces and scalable surfaces of active county buildings – "architecturally ugly, but oh so interesting when viewed as a challenging climb" – Modes models an encounter with the city contingent on sensory awareness and physical mastery of restricted space ("urban urges").

demands of infiltration, draining, and "roof-topping" populated buildings, water-filled tunnels, dank abandonments, and steep ledges allowed for picture-taking.

As Urban Adventuring migrated to the web and developed a stronger narrative presence and a vaster community, the line between UA and Urban Exploring blurred. However, as digital technology progressed through the late-nineties, it became possible to discern UrbEx individuating itself as a photo-centric culture. Exploring – as opposed to Adventuring – may be defined by its roots in visuality, an evolution critically linked to digital and photographic technologies. As the speed of web navigation via DSL, broadband, and FiOS connections increased, and as the quality and size of image sensors improved, Urban Explorers armed with digital SLR cameras have multiplied to tens of thousands across the world.

While it is no coincidence that UrbEx becomes more photo-centric as digital technology advances, this merger is more complex than a simple teaming of practice with equipment: UrbEx emerges as a ruins-centric culture. One could argue that Urban Exploring was born from the marriage of high-tech imaging and the growing number of abandonments in the tumultuous decade of the 2000s, yet many UrbEx hot-spots – heavy industry and mental institutions, "the two big "I"s of great vacancy-exploring opportunities" – were largely decommissioned in the 1970-80s (Max Action "Scouting"). The significant change, therefore, depends not on the rate of abandonment, but the relative ease of locating these places on the web. While a city's active buildings, drainage tunnels, and bridges are readily discoverable, its abandoned theaters, mines, schools, and mid-sized mills are typically harder to find – especially in cities unfamiliar to the Explorer. With global satellite technology, digitized news archives, and "deets" (location details) traded with other Explorers online, UrbExers scout out distant abandonments from home. This is an odd handshake between agile micro-technology and heavy industry. With the phenomenal advancement of graphics-enabling

computer technology, UrbExers – more than ever – are looking "back." They bring a new vision to one of Urban Adventuring's spatial playgrounds by transforming off-limits abandonments into stunning *ruins*.

From the nineteenth century onward, ruins have been a favorite subject of photographers.[14] As Roland Barthes memorably described, photographs confirm the pastness of their subjects, as if to say, "that has been" (77). Barthes portrays the camera as a retrospective machine, one that lends itself to (or might even be said to engineer) a *ruins vision*: a visual inclination to interpret a deserted, disused, or dilapidated built environment as the ruins of (a once active) place. I've noted that Urban Exploration, over the past decade, has become ruins-centric and contingent on photographic seeing. The pace, capacity, and growing affordability of digital technology can account for the explosion of UrbEx into a world-wide phenomenon., yet what explains this (photographic) turn to the past – to the rhetoric of historic documentation, recovery, and preservation framing images of a place that *was*? While a camera hampered Max Action's tunnel adventures, kowalski would not venture underground without his camera(s). Why and how did abandoned theaters, churches, steel mills, and water-powered generating stations – overwhelming physical structures – become tenuous remains requiring the Explorer's validation? And what are the implications of turning a sophisticated digital vision to the transformation of an outmoded industrial landscape?

Despite Explorers' transition into the more "noble," culturally validated missions of historical documentation and photo-preservation, UrbEx guards the vestigial characteristics of the transgressive spatial practice from which it emerged: the individual's self-conscious defiance of social norms and spatial restrictions; his interpretation of place through an embodied response to structure, surface, and space; and emphasis on subjective firsthand experience. These remnants of

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[14] See Joel Smith, *The Life and Death of Buildings* (2011).

the Adventuring past keep the visual, historically-oriented project of Urban Exploring rooted in solipsistic engagements with spaces and objects.

As Urban Explorers become vernacular historians, it is crucial to remember that buildings, rather than people, are their historical subjects – as well as their objects of analysis, their site of inquiry, and the source of their authority. Except in rare encounters with friendly guards and caretakers, Explorers do not interview former factory workers or local inhabitants; lived experiences of deindustrialization, as recounted by community members, are beyond their purview. Rather, Explorers' sense of history is determined by what they can find, both archaeologically and archivally: in the buildings themselves or via textual research, which they generally limit to web searches. From the Explorers' perspective, their own lived experience navigating a ruin invests them with authority as witnesses (though what they bear witness to constitutes the *aftermath* of closure, not the eras of productivity or deindustrialization). This authority extends to the Explorers' narratives, including historical claims based on their interpretation of found objects. As their photo-texts attest, many UrbExers believe that their firsthand encounter with ruins grants them jurisdiction over a building's industrial history and authorizes them to stipulate its postindustrial significance.

The postindustrial landscape is not "new" terrain; by definition, industrial ruins have already been tread, and in Certeau's words, "transformed into trash cans." Yet for Urban Explorers who never worked in a factory or frequented a lavish mid-century theater, these buildings are novel spaces. For the online UrbEx culture, however, the benchmark for Exploring is not personal discovery, but re-vision. Like the Adventurers before them who managed to "make do," conjuring thrills in the confines of the urban grid, UrbExers "make do" by *making it new* – that is, by locating beauty, innovation, and history in the discarded industrial landscape. Through an alchemy of

firsthand experience, digital photography, and self-expression, they transform their perception and experience of industrial blight.

The following case studies examine Matthew Christopher (formerly "abandonedamerica") and mANVIL's photo-texts as exemplary Urban Exploring narratives. My analysis of Matthew Christopher demonstrates how the transgressive practice of Exploring, rooted in Urban Adventuring, convenes with the blog genre to foster a proprietary relationship with ruins. Via mANVIL's myspace posts, I track how mANVIL morphs his masculine adventuring persona into that of an industrial historian. Nevertheless, the Explorer's "exceptional" self-image retains primacy over local stories.

Regarding Our Ruin Nation with Abandonedamerica

Matthew Christopher's (henceforth M.C.'s) "Abandoned America" website states his intention to "capture the mesmerizing beauty and lost history of the various derelict buildings dotting our country's landscape" ("about"). M.C., who is now a professional photographer in Philadelphia, began photographing abandoned state hospitals when he worked as an orderly on a psychiatric ward. His penchant for pathos and his fascination with vast institutional buildings drew him to decommissioned power plants, shuttered mills, and abandoned theaters in New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and other "undisclosed" Rust Belt locations ("business and industry").[15] The value of "lost history" seems, in M.C.'s mind, to be commensurate with the size of the factories he explores. In response to what he portrays as inevitable loss, M.C. has made it his mission to nostalgically "document," "chronicle," "chart," "record," "preserve," "catalogue," and "retain the

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[15] Since I began researching his work in 2008, M.C. has renovated his website many times, though his "business and industry" gallery still contains the most photo-texts.

history and essence of neglected sites before (and after) they are gone forever" ("once and done";

"the patron saint of peeling paint"; "the point at which it no longer matters"; "Confessions of a

Ruin Photographer (Part I)"; "in the shadows of the waking world"; "about"). Verging on

melodrama, M.C.'s dramatic language underscores his passionate personal investment in

abandonments and his desire to capture the aura these places hold for him. Like most UrbExers,

M.C. (selectively) downplays the subjectivity and contingency of his photo-texts, instead making

confident declarations about the history of industrialism and the beauty of its remains based on his

immersion in the Rust Belt.

He identifies himself as a camera-bearing witness, determined to face straight-on what most

refuse to see,[16] yet his painterly photographic style immediately complicates any pretention to a

documentary record (Figure 2.3). Bradley Garrett dismisses M.C.'s photo-texts as "overcooked"

("Comment"). Distinct from the "raw" documentary aesthetic of much UrbEx photography, M.C.'s

carefully (perhaps excessively) wrought response to industrial ruin feels extreme. Nevertheless, he

offers a compelling case study: M.C. takes ownership of industrial ruins by visually appropriating

them as an art subject, but he appropriates them rhetorically as well, to articulate his own private

post-industrial condition.

Matthew Christopher's *Abandoned America* grew out of a diary-style blog about his reflections

on the abandoned buildings he visited and photographed. For many years (he launched

www.abandonedamerica.us as a blog in 2006), the confessional style of the blog form enabled what

some Explorers have called his "emo" interpretations of industry (Descending).[17] M.C. demonstrates

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[16] See for instance "why we fight," in which M.C. declares, "we are the explorers, the preservationists of our age,/ and you will never stop us because the truth…/ the truth will never be destroyed."

[17] For discussion of the blog's affective conventions, see Aimée Morrison, "Blogs and Bloggin: Text and Practice" (2007).

a rabidly romantic appreciation for "the shipwrecks of past industries" ("a short bio"). In these "deteriorating worlds I live in…scarred by years of neglect and misery," his personal feelings of despair, hopelessness, and isolation find an objective correlative in the physical conditions of the buildings ("the collapsing world"). From his perspective, the Rust Belt is rife with tragedy and loss, and the scale of its destruction reflects back the intensity of his own feelings.

Figure 1.**3**: Matthew Christopher. "office space." In "New Jersey Zinc." Photograph. *matthew christopher's Abandoned America*. April 2009. Web. Accessed: http://www.abandonedamerica.us/photo8848522.html. 12 Nov. 2011. Screenshot.

The forms of authorship UrbEx encourages foster personal claims, leading some Explorers to take symbolic ownership of privately owned buildings. What might seem extreme in M.C.'s work is in many ways typical UrbEx practice, made more emphatic by his dramatic prose and lavish photographic style. M.C.'s photo-processing techniques illuminate the industrial sites he photographs, turning them into framed "high" art, as in the Vermeer-esque image above. These visual effects pronounce the intensity of his attachment to certain abandonments, illuminating them as an attempt to capture "the dreamy and surreal aura" of M.C.'s encounter ("love at first sight").

Industrial ruins represent more than an interface between the past and present, between M.C. and a residual material culture. Personifying abandoned buildings as feeling subjects, M.C. portrays his encounter with these places as an intimate exchange. Ruins are particularly amenable to his projections and co-optations because disinvestment has vacated the buildings of their prior use-value. Abandonment has literally opened a space for M.C. to intervene with his own interpretations.

Figure 1.**4**: Christopher, Matthew. "an autopsy of the american dream." In "Home." Photograph. *matthew christopher's Abandoned America.* Web. n.d. Accessed: http://www.abandonedamerica.us/. 5 Oct. 2011. Screenshot.

On the homepage of abandonedamerica.us, this image greets M.C.'s audience with a visual metaphor for the Rust-Belt-ization of America.[18] The chips and curls of peeled lead paint (from the wall of an abandoned state hospital) convey an intricate topography of ruin writ large, projected as a

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[18] "abandonedamerica" was also Matthew Christopher's Exploring moniker, which he replaced with his legal first and middle name in 2010. This switch, I suspect, was motivated by M.C.'s entry into the mainstream art world. M.C. holds regular gallery shows of his photographs and, also in 2010, joined the graduate program in visual arts at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Shortly thereafter, he overhauled his website to make it "more streamlined" ("about"). This re-design was largely a response to critique from his RIT professors (Interview).

collective national condition. This photograph conveys M.C.'s view of America after almost a decade of immersing himself in depressed towns and decrepit architecture across the East Coast and Midwest. As an impassioned UrbExer, M.C. has mapped out, traveled to, and personally explored hundreds of abandonments: industrial, residential, religious, and institutional (according to the taxonomy by which he organizes his photo-text galleries). Like most Urban Explorers, M.C.'s vision of America is crowded with ruins. He chooses not to fixate on the "prefabricated" new constructions that fill "every spare plot of land," but rather on the spaces of decay he seeks out weekend after weekend, bolstering his feeling that decline is enveloping the nation ("about"). M.C. has encountered a wide range of ruined buildings and witnessed what UrbExers note as the three forces that bring them down – demolition by writ, "vigilante demolition," and "demolition by neglect." He confesses that

> I live in a world that seems to me to be falling apart, and I can't escape it. When
> these places are ultimately destroyed, by vandalism and arson and the wrecking ball,
> it isn't something I observe with idle detachment. Beyond the destruction of our
> shared history and heritage, the demolition of these sites represents the destruction
> of my own personal past and the relationship I formed with these places. That grief
> and helplessness affects me deeply and I feel it at times like I would the loss of a
> friend. ("Confessions of a Ruin Photographer Part II")

When M.C. revisits buildings only to see that "decay and the elements, combined with theft and vandalism" have made demolition a certain future, he takes it personally ("rounding out the set"). The scale of his lament slides back and forth between the macro and the micro – invoking an endangered national heritage (the U.S. map) or his own private pain (M.C.'s up-close/close-up view

of decay) – but this range of response omits local, community experiences. M.C. interiorizes the physical conditions and social ramifications of industrial decline as personal ramifications.

M.C. defines the present by its lost creativity. This post-industrial epoch invites him to step up as an artist whose creative work can redeem the pathologized landscape left by deindustrialization. But he is no activist. Mourning what he never experienced, M.C. retrospectively projects the inevitable loss of an idealized past: "the social institutions that defined our country are blinking out," he confirms, and "our industries are no longer our economic engine but rather superfund sites" ("Confessions (Part I)"). This situation demands his intercession. More than merely "capturing" or "retaining," as his "about" description maintains, M.C. aims for something greater – to transform his audience's vision of the Rust Belt. One of his posts proclaims him the "patron saint of peeling paint." Yet, to qualify as a redeemer, M.C. cannot be implicated in the destruction he aims to transcend. Identifying the postindustrial landscape as "the world i have inherited," he distinguishes himself from the anonymous "you" who catalyzed the ruin ("Confessions (Part I)"). Aggrandizing his explorations, he claims to "venture where angels fear to tread" ("buffalo color corp.") in order to share the "the fragile and mesmerizing beauty that still exists, hidden away in the husks of old mills and stockyards" ("Confessions (Part I)"). Industrial ruins have reached the critical end-stage where M.C.'s narrative and photographic recovery work is, to his mind, the only means of "salvaging" them ("mailbag"). Emphasizing the inevitability of demolition only heightens the urgency of this project: redemption through the image.

M.C. professes that abandonments "speak to" him, and he feels that his photos speak to their importance. They convey his insight into these dark, neglected places – qualities unseen without the "right" sensibilities to illuminate them ("a short bio"). He rarely states his insights directly but instead ventriloquizes the buildings he photographs. Many of M.C.'s write-ups employ a

trope wherein the buildings themselves use him as a medium to lament being abandoned, contaminated, and broken-down. Sometimes he interprets these places as testaments to survival, perseverance, and endurance. Sometimes he finds beauty in their surfaces of decay. Sometimes he reads into the vestiges of labor a care and quality of work that are now lost (mourning industrial labor or industrial culture rather than simply lamenting the conditions of abandonment).

Typically, though, M.C. is a resolute pessimist, for whom industrial decline echoes his personal anxieties.[19] The post-industrial break yields a landscape that corroborates his worldview, but most of his posts give no attention to the specific causes or local consequences of decay (he focuses on the greater scale).[20] Though M.C. confirms his aim of ensuring that the "unique characteristics, stories, and social impact [of deindusrialization] are not forgotten and can be shared with the world at large," until recently he engaged with industrial ruins as memento mori, as icons of loss made more poignant by their "monumental decay" ("Confessions (Part I)"). Indeed, the writing he appends to his photos overlooks the "unique" features of place, as if the exclusion of location-specific stories makes the ruins easier to appropriate. Before 2011, when M.C. renovated www.abandonedamerica.us, he captioned his photos with lyric ruminations on failure and psychological depression. Unabashedly appropriating the material qualities of the "portside power plant," M.C. lamented that "even when he was externally surrounded by others the world had become a wasteland…the vaulted ceilings of his most precious hopes were slowly crumbling and the

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[19] In "carrie furnaces: it's all a matter of perspective," M.C. reflects that "i am not what most people/ would consider an optimist. if you were to ask me the standard question about whether the glass is half empty or/ half full, for example, i am the one who tends to reply that since whatever is left in the glass will evaporate or be/ consumed over time, you might as well consider it completely empty and spare yourself the heartache of watching/ it gradually vanish."

[20] Much of my research for this chapter took place between 2008 and 2012. In editing his website since then, Matthew Christopher has deleted some of the material I quote and added new write-ups to supplement his older, more confessional and imaginative posts. The current iteration of my project focuses on M.C.'s earlier work, which remains foundational to his website. Although his more recent writing foregrounds researched facts about the buildings he explores, a romantic attachment to "ruins" still infiltrates his photo-texts. See, for instance, "Confessions (Part 1)."

machinery that drove his will had ground to a halt" ("proceed with caution"). The materiality of the ruin provides convenient figures for articulating M.C.'s discontent. The power plant serves, literally, as a "structure of feeling," crystallizing M.C.'s own felt experience of the postindustrial but offering little insight into the "social experience" of deindustrialization (Williams 97).

Exploring also furnishes M.C. with exceptional experience. Though *Abandoned America* nominally concerns itself with the social ramifications of industrial closure, its archive of accumulated posts betrays an Adventurer's enthrallment with space. What seems to undergird M.C.'s belief that industrial modernity was the pinnacle of American culture is not any social benefit of the era's institutions, but the awesome scale of its factory buildings. "[E]ntering such massive sites is awe-inspiring and profound," he declares ("connected). M.C. revels in this extravagance of space, "far more intricate and ornate than our ordinary world, with its gray cubicles and prefabricated sentiments allows" ("my downward spiral). In the "atlantic avenue power plant" he affirms that "two cavernous turbine halls…redefine the scale one is accustomed to in interior spaces…i've said it before and i'll say it again: i love power plants." Intriguingly, immersing himself in decay on such a vast scale does not always depress M.C. Marveling at "the magical world of unchecked ruin," he submits to its "enchanting" aura ("connected"). The manic quality of M.C.'s posts, which oscillate between exhilaration and despair, reflects "the semantic instability of the ruin" (Hell and Schönle 6). As liminal sites, ruins are flexible figures that can be adapted, staged, and re-scripted to reflect M.C.'s mood. The blog is a similarly receptive form, which accommodates the author's shifting responses to ruin.[21]

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[21] Many UrbExers alter their style, focus, and perspective from one post to the next, and this inconsistency has deterred scholars from extensively analyzing their photo-texts. Because Explorers are their own website producers, their photo-texts are not submitted to a formal editing process. Instead they are peer reviewed by friends and web surfers who care to leave comments. The Explorer-producer retains sole editorial authority in a genre that privileges self-expression, rather than a stream-lined or coherent narrative.

The sensual immediacy of the vast ruined factory enables M.C. to sideline its social dimensions. Overwhelmed by the sensuality of decay (made more vibrant in his photos), M.C. seldom refers to the history of a building prior to its closure. When he does, however, the histories he infers and recounts are laced with his own response to the present state of decay. In a singular textual moment, M.C. makes factory shut-down his context for interpretation. To anchor his photos of Bethlehem Steel, he reflects on the day the mill closed – but he does so through the "consciousness" of the ruined Beth Steel turbine hall, as if the building could recount its last day of work. M.C. imagines the steelworkers leaving the mill one last time, but he seems reticent to inhabit their subjectivity. The mill itself is (quite literally) easier to inhabit, and it proves a more comfortable site from which to imagine the felt experience of shut-down. The mill workers

> seemed dazed, as though lost in a dream, wandering about familiar things made alien
>
> and monstrous, all unblinking symbols of impending loss…for no reason the earth
>
> had shifted and a vast chasm opened that was separating them from an innocent
>
> past, where such a blank, uncompromising shutdown seemed unimaginable…and
>
> when they walked out to their cars for the last time, each of them slowed, turned,
>
> and with a long exhale looked back, and subconsciously knew that in this moment of
>
> passing we were inextricably linked. ("when they left")
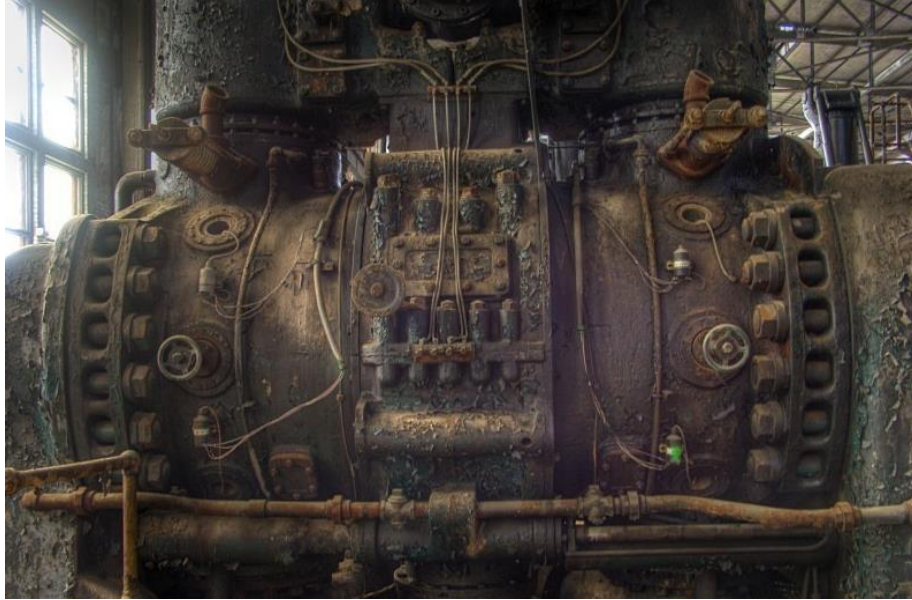
Figure 1.5: Christopher, Matthew "pilgrimage." In "Bethlehem Steel." Photograph. *matthew christopher's Abandoned America*. Oct. 2006. Web. Accessed: http://www.abandonedamerica.us/photo11144030.html. 25 Nov. 2011. Screenshot.

Translating the "mute testimonial" of the ruin into a tragic scene of leaving feels less egregious than ventriloquizing the workers themselves. ("Confessions (Part I)"). Since M.C., as an Urban Explorer, engages with vacant buildings and found objects rather than people, he enjoys a creative freedom in distilling the "essence" of place (or, rather, composing what he presents as its latent stories). Influenced by his personal experience of Beth Steel in ruins, he privileges its post-closure conditions and, again, retrospectively projects his image of the mill onto the laid-off workers. He extemporizes a lived experience of shut-down from his photo of machinery rendered "alien and monstrous" by his own post-industrial perspective. It's interesting that, in M.C.'s account, the workers do not speak to each other, but are "inextricably linked" with the mill. Exemplary of UrbEx, the abandoned building remains the privileged site of encounter – a more potent emblem of collective felt experience than an imagined community of (laid-off) workers.

M.C. supplements these personalization techniques with High Dynamic Range imaging

(HDR), a processing technique that layers multiple bracketed exposures of the same shot, yielding a

painterly effect. M.C.'s subjects appear unreal, more like the photographer's creation than a

transcription of the world. Through drastic Photoshop mediations, such as tonal mapping, M.C.'s

HDR technique produces exquisite ruins. The images below juxtapose M.C.'s photographic vision

with that of mANVIL. Both UrbExers captured the same angle on the Richmond Power Station;

however, M.C.'s HDR style maintains an eerie balance between darkness and light, shadow and

intricate visual textures. Ultimately, he illuminates a level of detail that could not be captured in a

single image, or even a firsthand encounter.

Figure 1.6: Christopher, Matthew. "proceed with caution." In "Portside Power Plant*." Photograph. *matthew christopher's Abandoned America.* Nov. 2006. Web. Accessed: http://www.abandonedamerica.us/photo8889208.html. 15 Dec. 2011. Screenshot.
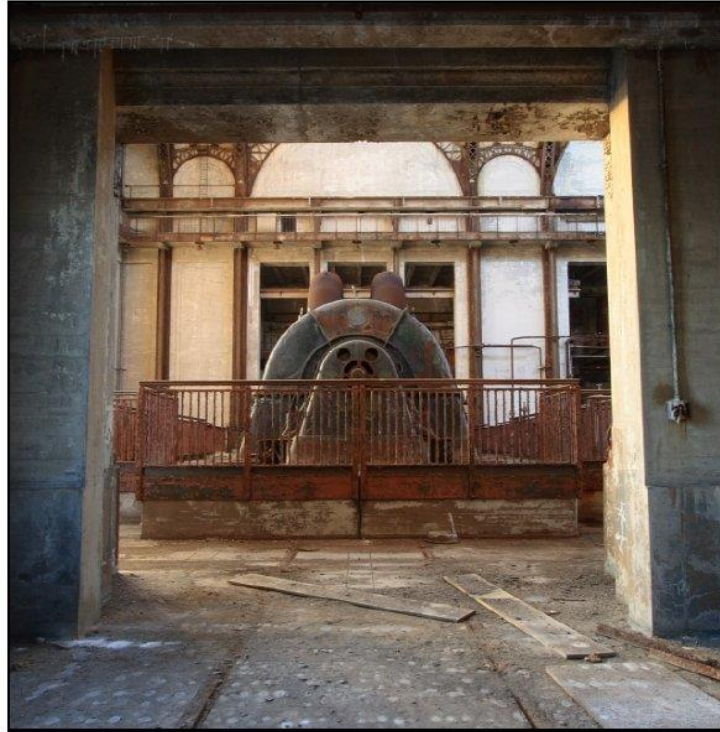
Figure 1.7: "Threshold." In "…like something from a movie." Photograph. *myspace*. 21 Nov. 2007. Web. Accessed: http://www.myspace.com/manvil34#!/manvil34/blog. [Website no longer available.] 20 Dec. 2011. Photograph.

In deference to the places they photograph, UrbExers typically favor a documentary aesthetic that minimizes the appearance of digital mediation.[22] In contrast, M.C.'s photos visually corroborate his dramatic style of self-expression. His photo-texts reveal that Explorers' claims to preservation elide a more complex reality. That is, when UrbExers photographically "preserve" a building, they create a specific artistic interpretation. Such preservation work transforms the

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[22] Industrial ruins prove to be generative in their defunct state. A widely accepted standard among UrbEx web forums demands a photograph's fidelity to its subject-place: HDR and other post-production editing techniques should not overwhelm the building, rendering it unrecognizable. Rather, the purpose of these tools is to make people see a ruin in new ways by revealing its latent beauty, rather than using the building as a base from which to flaunt one's Photoshop abilities. Respect for the building is the foundation of the UrbEx ethos. For this reason, the genre of UrbEx photography remains grounded in the documentary tradition. Yet, despite the transcriptive quality associated with UrbEx photography and despite the project of honoring a historically significant but woefully neglected place, the Explorer's emotive and artistic subjectivity, measured by the photographic image, remains primary.

contours, texture, scope, and significance of place. Through *Abandoned America*, M.C. remediates the disordered space of decay through tight aesthetic control.

By transmuting place into digital art, unmoored from a context of lived experience or a real-world location, M.C. encourages viewers to focus on his artistic intervention. On his website, ruins become a stunning mise-en-scène for M.C.'s alternatively nostalgic and despairing stories. M.C. also copyrights his images, visibly marking them for his own. Staking these claims virtually, M.C. practices a form of gate-keeping to "protect" our tenuous industrial patrimony from "you, the public," scrappers, vandals, other Explorers, and "curious locals" ("why we fight", "mailbag"). Further, by changing the names of the buildings he photographs – and by refusing to reveal their location details – M.C. actively discourages people from visiting the ruins themselves. Conflating his (web)site with the sites he photographs ("in the shadows of the waking world"), M.C. dismisses the distance between his immersive spatial experience and the mediated views he offers his audience, suggesting that "you only have to look" – at his pictures ("about"). Through these visual and textual methods of gate-keeping, M.C. identifies himself as "one of the right people whom [the ruins] speak to and through" ("a short bio"). On *Abandoned America* he becomes the arbitrator of the buildings' meaning: a photographic caretaker with the authority to decide what constitutes a legitimate experience of place. Though he has, of late, aligned himself with preservation motives, M.C.'s priority is not community outreach or even architectural stabilization. When he remarks that, after wandering through his website, "maybe you'll even find yourself moved to contribute in some way to continuing the cause," the cause is his own Exploring project ("about"). Donations of up to $100 can be made through PayPal on his website.

<u>Reclaiming MANual Labor</u>

mANVIL makes his living as a computer programmer but prefers when "Life & work [don't] get in the way of exploring" ("return of the manvil blog").[23] Fascinated by an idealized prehistory of industrialism, mANVIL echoes many UrbExers in glorifying industrial modernity as a time "when coke and ore were forged into strong, incredible things like the steel that built the Empire State Building and the Golden Gate Bridge" (Interview 2013). Enthralled with the "behemoths" of industry, he celebrates his own "lust for the rust" on his *myspace* homepage. His dramatic introduction to a post about the Richmond Power Station demonstrates his infatuation with derelict factories, particularly the machinery of power generation:

> Reminiscent of a futuristic post apocolyptic [*sic*] movie set, entering this place is like being transported to some kind of industrial Narnia. Built nearly 100 years ago this facility contained the largest electric steam turbine of its time. The neoclassic architecture of its massive cathedral-like turbine hall is unlike any other place I have ever seen or been to. There really is nothing like this anywhere in the world. If you like to climb (check) and are not afraid of death (check) this place holds some amazing opportunities. This was one of the best days I've ever had. ("Industrial Set of Doom")

With an edge of Adventuring, mANVIL's blog celebrates and romanticizes industrial work.

By his moniker, mANVIL aligns himself with a deep cultural history of masculine manual labor, in distinct contrast to his own job of encoding bits of data. "mANVIL" invokes a Vulcan myth of hand-work, when man and anvil fashioned iron into unique weapons and tools. The

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[23] In 2013, mANVIL "shut down" his myspace account. Thankfully, I had archived his posts in digital and print form.

combination of "man" and "anvil" in "mANVIL" conveys a particularly empowering identity. The anvil is the solid structure on which hot steel is pounded and bent. "mANVIL" conjures a solidity, an invulnerability, and a craftsmanship that long predate corporate steelwork. By identifying as mANVIL, he links himself with manly arts of metallurgy, but also with America's recent history of manufacturing, for most steel mills contain blacksmith forges for in-house repairs of tools and machines. Thus, "mANVIL" also alludes – unwittingly, I suspect – to Fordist technology based in mass-production of interchangeable parts: an alienating form of labor that mANVIL does not care to remember. The man is the anvil, and he does not bend. The transformation of raw material into "strong, incredible things" – of which mANVIL is so enamored – proves an apt metaphor for his personal transformation through UrbEx photo-texts. One self-portrait from *myspace* is particularly suggestive. With his legs hidden behind a massive forge-shop anvil, mANVIL morphs into an industrial satyr: half-man, half-anvil.

Figure 1.8: mANVIL. "Anvil." In "Industrial set of Doom." Photograph. *myspace*. 23 Jan. 2009. Web. Accessed: http://www.myspace.com/#!/manvil34/blog/465948582. [Website no longer available.] 15 Dec. 2011. Photograph.

mANVIL fashions an identity for himself in the crucible of the abandoned steel mills. He genuinely appreciates the aura of manly labor that abandoned factories hold for him, and he demonstrates his affinity by adopting the pose of an idealized proletarian laborer.[24] Aspects of Urban Adventuring resonate throughout mANVIL's "About Me" statement on *myspace*. Quoting Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, he professes that "the very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence, there is

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[24] In *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism*, Paula Rabinowitz traces the cultural origins and persistent legacy of this distinctly masculine figure – the heroic working man. See especially pages 124-130.

no greater joy than to have an endless changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun" (qtd. "About Me"). Ironically, mANVIL's "new" experiences are forged in aging, decrepit places. They happen in industrial abandonments, which in their operative years were frequently associated with repetitive, systematized manufacture. No longer productive members of society, these structures offer "amazing opportunities": shut-down and excised from the routine space of the city, they enable mANVIL to convene with unconventional spaces and extend their legacy of heroic labor into the present. Standing atop "the largest electric steam turbine of its time," he partakes of a mythic history of robust power culminating in his triumphant ascent of the machine ("like something from a movie").

Figure 1.9: mANVIL. "Turbine intensity." In "…like something from a movie." Photograph. *myspace*. 21 Nov. 2007. Web. Accessed: http://www.myspace.com/manvil34#!/manvil34/blog. [Website no longer available.] 20 Dec. 2011. Photograph.

His stance aligns him with the technological power of the factories and the physical strength of the men who labored there. The masculinity that the name "mANVIL" invokes is corporeal: demonstrated by physical acts that make the body into a spectacle. However, even when mANVIL does not picture himself in his photos, his physical skill and the risks he takes in maneuvering old

factories filled with hazards (weak scaffolding, broken window glass, exposed wires, industrial toxins, not to mention the possibility of violent encounters with scrappers or drug dealers) is implicit in many of his shots – vantages that could only be achieved by climbing onto high catwalks. While mANVIL does not risk his life to make steel, he risks his life for the sake of his (creative) work – to craft an impressive shot. Through these photos, mANVIL demonstrates both his artistic and physical prowess and exhibits his virility as an Explorer.

Figure 1.10: mANVIL. "Topping the turbines." In "..like something from a movie." Photograph. *myspace*. 24 Oct. 2007. Web. Accessed: http://www.myspace.com/manvil34#!/manvil34/blog. [Website no longer available.] 20 Dec. 2011. Photograph.

Cultural geographer Tim Edensor honors the "involuntary memories" that abandonments inspire (143) and argues that by tracing the former paths of workers through a derelict factory, Explorers evoke "the mundane passage of lived factory time" (159). mANVIL's exhilarating narratives discount this theory. Instead of "remembering" monotonous mechanical work, he fixates on the awesome scale of the Richmond Power station and his own risky maneuvering of its corroded turbines and catwalks. Above his photo of latticed scaffolding at the height of Richmond's

56

turbine hall (Figure 2.10), mANVIL remarks, "In general I don't recommend balancing on 100 year old I-beams 140 feet in the air trying to take pictures. But I was feeling particularly invulnerable that day" ("like something from a movie"). The massive structure inspires mANVIL's own feats of physical – and creative – labor to photograph the site of what was, he suggests, dangerous and ennobling work. To distinguish his personal exploits, mANVIL must elevate the Station beyond the mundane details of its everyday functioning. By situating himself and composing images at great heights, and by citing Richmond's superlative qualities, mANVIL narrates the building in his own powerful image (and vice versa).

Figure 1.11: mANVIL. "power11." From "industrial set of doom." Photograph. *myspace.* 23 Jan. 2009. Web. Accessed: http://www.myspace.com/#!/manvil34/blog/465948582. [Website no longer available.] 15 Dec. 2011. Photograph.

In self-portraits laced with bravado, mANVIL faces the camera, demonstrating that he is not distracted or bewildered by the massive power-generating equipment that flanks him. Its metallic musculature is a fitting companion to his own muscular body, which he solidifies with crossed arms

and a stalwart stance. The massive size of turbines, steam engines, and blast furnaces lend a mythic

quality to mANVIL's personal exploits. The equipment does not dwarf his body. Instead, he

partakes of the mighty physical presence of this machinery – so large that he must scale it; this

equipment is a place unto itself. It does not need to be in operation to impress the viewer with its

power – or by extension, mANVIL's.

In his eyes, the dangers associated with work are part of the technological process, not risks

that unduly threaten workers lives – conditions that could be avoided with better safety measures.[25]

mANVIL's historical vision of labor is just as selective as Matthew Christopher's but it selects a

different aspect of labor history: its empowering side. He never mentions the repetitiveness of labor

or the overwhelming fatigue of a swing shift. Histories of conflict between unions and management

do not figure into his vision of industry's legacy. Even though mANVIL explores shuttered industry,

layoffs and downsizing do not enter his field of vision. There is no room for pathos in his accounts.

Working-class struggle (apart from the physical demands of dangerous but fulfilling work) is

conspicuously absent from his vision of industry's legacy. In order to pose triumphantly on an

abandoned turbine, partaking of its bygone power, mANVIL neglects the power struggles between

labor and management at the Phillips Power Station, leading readers to wonder how local stories

would complement or conflict with mANVIL's scripting of this space as a terrain for self-

realization.

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[25] The Occupational Safety and Health Act passed in 1970 established OSHA to design and enforce safety standards in the workplace. Nevertheless, industrial labor remains dangerous. My father was a manager of manufacturing at Northrop Grumman for many years, and he confirmed that "Of the 250 people working in my area, a significant number had missing fingers and scarred hands. Though I took safety seriously, I was still writing up accident reports every month or two" (Palmer, Ronald. Personal Interview. 10 Oct. 2010). Working in a manufacturing plant endangers more than workers' hands. Their lungs may be exposed to coal dust, lubricants, flux from soldering and welding, acids from chemical baths, gasses emitted from large baking ovens (for manufacturing circuit boards, name plates, etc.) aerosol oils from cutting machines, and cleaning solvents used daily to maintain the machinery.

When mANVIL describes the motivations for Exploring, abandoned buildings emerge as crucial sites: the terrain that makes history available to the Explorer's defiant spatial investigations. He defines this historic value through opposition to conventional spaces and values. "Today's museums" he claims, cannot match the exceptionality of abandonments for their "accurate representations of time and place." Citing the importance of immersive spatial experience to an authentic understanding of history, mANVIL dismisses museums as "ordinary buildings" which offer "tiny glimpses of history behind glass cases and dull words." Refusing to privilege age-value, mANVIL venerates "the buildings of the last 200 years" for their "relevan[ce] to the world as we know it today." "While fascinating," he admits, "I have nothing in common with the people who built the pyramids or fought in the coliseum." In contrast, modern ruins "are OUR history" ("What Exactly Is Urban Exploration (UE)?").

Missing Parts / Found Objects

mANVIL posits that site-specific spatial experience tenders an authentic understanding of history, surpassing the history pinned like specimens in the glass cases of museums. Similarly, Tunnelbug, a San Francisco-based Explorer, deems that what he can surmise from place exceeds the academic's depth of knowledge:

> Beyond their raw photographic, draw though — beyond the interplay of light and
> rust, peeling paint, and the odor of asbestos and death is something [about exploring
> abandonments] that tells more about our culture than any critic or pundit could. Top
> secret manuals strewn about in military bases closed by the Base Realignment
> Committee; a multi-million dollar mansion built by a copper baron; the pervasive
> smell of benzyne, diesel fuel, and who-knows-what-else hundreds of feet

underground in a Titan 1 missile silo. These experiences are incredibly formative; in

an odd way they are the modern, post-industrial equivalent of Muir's cathedrals.

(Haeber "Treatise on Trespassing")

Lurking behind UrbEx claims to historic authenticity lies the concern that when theaters, factories, asylums, and prisons are officially "preserved," and their history commodified, then Explorers not only lose the adventure of total access, but also their freedom to produce a vision of place. For most Explorers, preservation represents another "closure" in the history of an industrial abandonment. Unlike the stoppage of industrial work, official preservation shuts out the Explorer: his intimate experience of the building, as a continuation of its history, ceases. Instead of the Explorer being the eye that *sees* (through a lens) and the heroic, fascinating, and spectacular "I" who *is seen*, he is relegated to the "you," another cog in the membership of the viewing public.

Figure 1.12: Haeber, Jonathan. "Employment health cards in the basement of the 1896 Union Iron Works administration building." Photograph. 12 April 2007. "Bethlehem Steel, Wartime Labor, San Francisco." *Bearings*. Web. Accessed: http://www.terrastories.com/bearings/bethlehem-steel-wartime-labor-and-san-francisco. 15 Oct. 2011. Photograph.

Explorers believe in the primacy of the eye and being in the right place, those (damaged, depopulated) buildings where history congeals. When a building loses its human element, its continuing state of neglect calls out, "something happened here – *and attention must be paid*" (Miller 132). Interpretation of found objects – the building's artifacts – represents a foundational element of UrbExers' photo-texts. These narratives, therefore, depend upon a certain serendipity; each thing that is found (or not found) inflects the presentation and understanding of place and the history it betokens. For Tunnelbug, creating a photo-text labor history of San Francisco's Union Iron Works succeeds in large part due to his fortuitous discovery of "Employment health cards in the basement of the 1896 Union Iron Works administration building" (Figure 2.12).

Rather than offer a close-up shot of a single record, TunnelBug pictures the vast pile of "primary documents" and recounts the most striking features of the material he read firsthand:

> Each card lists physical descriptions (including euphemisms like: "fat, thin, slovenly, lethargic, pale, nervous, wiry, muscular"). They have the home address and the name of the steelworker, their heart condition, their scars — there's even an eerie column for "missing parts" (perhaps an indication of the danger of the line of work they were in). There had to be over 20,000 sheets in the pile. A neatly stacked historical record that probably won't survive another 20 years simply because of its volume. (Haeber "Bethlehem Steel Part I")

Tunnelbug's intimate proximity to the mass of health cards heightens the drama of his story – the shock of discovering that 20,000 individuals were dehumanized into a taxonomy of parts. For

TunnelBug, these health cards furnish a more detailed, intimate, and personalized view of the conditions of the urban steel workers than dry descriptions of the general urban proletariat.[26]

Selective Historical Consciousness: Editing the Scene

mANVIL's opposition to the museumification of abandonments raises interesting questions about the depth of history offered by UrbEx photo-texts. While many Explorers, such as M.C., imagine that their photos channel "memories" embedded in artifacts, mANVIL's myspace blog never once – in 46 posts, over three years – mentions "memory." What's more, he only uses the word "past" to describe his Exploring trips: "this past winter," "this past week." Snippets of history he garners from the web (*not* the buildings) make his own lived experience in abandoned places more distinctive. For mANVIL, history is the overlapping of lived experiences bundled by location. Yet past stories remain a backdrop for the ongoing story of mANVIL's most recent encounter with place. When the abandonment's history of use is interesting or exceptional, mANVIL uses it to stimulate his own encounter, or his self-performance on the stage of industrial decay captured for "you" his viewing public.

The Rust Belt does not overwhelm mANVIL. Instead it furnishes an occasion to seize agency and portray himself favorably. Rhetorically, UrbExers reinforce a historical "post/industrial break" so that they can re-use the industrial – its material vestiges, its structures of feeling. If

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[26] Urban Explorers' reliance on photographing "primary documents" and "artifacts" as the basis of history reflects the serendipitous – or haphazard – nature of historical discovery in general and the "expressive" power attributed to artifacts. It leads us to ask whether "OUR history" is more authentic when transmitted through the "tiny glimpses" provided by some of the photo-texts of do-it-yourself Explorers or the "tiny glimpses" provided by academically sanctioned or museum-vetted showpieces. As embedded historians and self-styled documentarians, Urban Explorers may have a niche in industrial history research. In her preface to *The Works: The Industrial Architecture of the United States*, Betsy Hunter Bradley posits that "Even though this type of structure [industrial buildings] seemed as interesting, if not more so, than others, factories have seldom been studied by architectural historians" (1).

industrial labor and culture have been abandoned to a distant, former time, then their artifacts, both material and affective, become available – a history available for the UrbExers' appropriation. The "comments" which friends attach to mANVIL's *myspace* posts confirm that personal achievements, both physical and photographic, are larger motivations for his UrbEx project. With friends affirming, "that's hot" (Maypost qtd. "Get Pumped"), praising his "cojones enormes" (Joyce qtd. "With a can of mace and a prayer"), and declaring, "i wanna have like ten thousand of your babies" (DrunkleSteve qtd. "Epic Adventures"), mANVIL's fan base confirms his virility. Industrial ruins rejuvenate his ego.

Re-Claiming Industrial Power through "Site-Specific Performance"
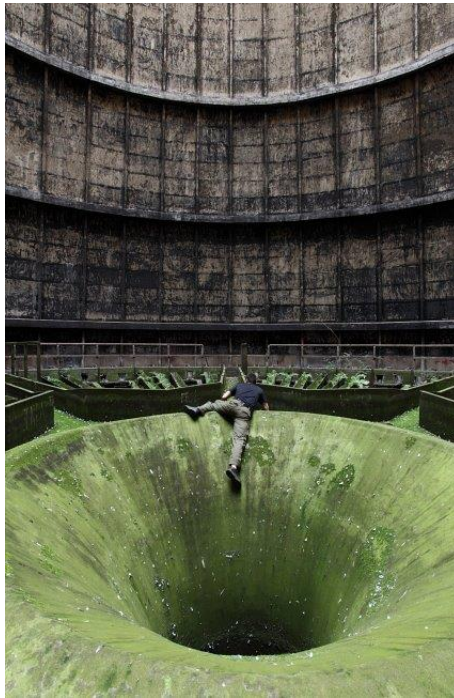
Figure 1.13: P, Matt. "I have emerged!" Photograph. 11 Oct. 2011. "Timeline photos." *facebook*. Web. Accessed:
https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10150345641088279&set=a.10150345641083279.365763.815808278&type=3&theater.
30 Sept. 2013. Photograph.

Figure 1.14: Hine, Lewis. "Power house mechanic working on steam pump." From *Men at Work, 1920-1940: Dignity of Labor*. Photograph. 1920. *National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the Work Projects Administration*. (69-RH-4L-2) [VENDOR # 36]. Accessed: "Picturing the Century: One Hundred Years of Photography from the National Archive – Portfolio: Lewis Hine." *National Archives*. Web. http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/picturing_the_century/port_hine/port_hine_img22.html. 30 Sept. 2013. Photograph.

According to cultural anthropologist Michael Shanks, "site-specific performance" consists of acts that are "conceived for, mounted within and conditioned by the particulars of found spaces." "Inseparable from their site," these performances emerge as a complex interplay of the intervening performer with a pre-existing location (Pearson and Shanks 23). I suggest that in their site-specific performances, Urban Explorers transform industrial ruins into a stage with a history. If, as Certeau affirms, the late-capitalist American city has not learned to "play on its pasts," and instead discards them – piling wreckage upon wreckage as old buildings turn into "trashcans" (91) – then Urban Explorers demonstrate how to personally redeem these excesses. They have found ways to reinvent themselves by "playing on" the city's discarded pasts.

Rather than a static pose, the image that opens this section resembles a performance still-shot (Figure 2.13). By construing abandonments as sites for performance, Explorers showcase their interpretation of industrial history and enact their own role within it. As Shanks underscores, site-specific performance is the "radical alternative" to historical reenactment (1). In his performance of the Richmond Power Station, mANVIL defies the pre-existing script of this space (by which I mean the physical practices and events that constitute its history – with workers' activity scripted by the demands of machinery and the hierarchy of operations at the plant). Subverting the routinized operations of the power station, mANVIL performs what Certeau calls a "kinesthetic appropriation" of its equipment (97). mANVIL has chosen to actualize this space by choreographing his own movements in ways that industrial workers themselves – the original actors on this scene – could not. Through the physical and creative interpretations of space that UrbEx invites, mANVIL plays the "part" of the industrial worker, but reinterprets this role subversively. His performance transforms the nuclear power plant into his playful post-industrial terrain.

The two images of that open this section might seem an odd pairing, but they help me articulate how Urban Explorers animate the defunct spaces of industry with a new labor, distinct from – sometimes in defiance of – the work carried out amidst the strictures of production. I interpret both photos as images of labor. The second is a "work portrait" entitled "Power house mechanic working on steam pump" taken in 1920 by social documentary photographer Lewis Hine (Figure 2.14). One could interpret this iconic image as a robust laborer in perfect harmony with his work. The machine seems to grow out of the man's muscular body in a seamless nautilus spiral, a curve that we can imagine outspreading the frame in endless revolutions. The tight frame of this image suggest the possibility of infinite power melding man and machine beyond this partial view. From another angle, however, Hine's photo exemplifies the crippling strictures of industrial labor.

The worker's back is bent, as if the machinery of production imprisoned him within its curves to endlessly tighten bolts. His body is strong because it must be.

In counterpoint to this confining image, mANVIL extracts himself from an industrial abyss – using his strength to free himself from the seemingly infinite depth that would suck him in. Whereas Hine portrays work extending endlessly beyond the frame, mANVIL stages a deft escape from the spiraling vortex of industry. With this skillful maneuver, he seizes autonomy from the historical context of workers' alienating labor. On the ruined industrial stage, mANVIL performs a spontaneity that could never play out in a corporate context of industrial work, where labor is defined – and constrained by – manufacturing: by engineering specifications, by the demands of the manufacturing process itself, and by management's surveillance. mANVIL's spontaneity (albeit a self-consciously performed spontaneity) is antithetical to the labor of manufacturing. His risky, playful act re-scripts this nuclear power plant as a theater of action where the remains of industrial production can serve as props for his masculinist self-fashioning. Performing his interpretation of the factory as a space of transformative re-birth, mANVIL performs his own agility, intrepidity, and autonomy. The de-commissioned site accommodates his physical maneuverings, inflecting them with the aura of dangerous industrial work. mANVIL's self-indulgent performance raises ethical questions: How can mANVIL reconcile his appropriation of these worksites with their social histories? As he adapts the abandoned space of production into a venue for self-making, does mANVIL substitute himself for the displaced worker? Or can we think of him as a descendent, or self-styled inheritor, of the legacy of industrial labor?

As the stage for the Exploring event, industrial ruins are the site of transgressive entry, navigation, and photographic discovery. Visually uprooting a building from its local landscape, UrbExers rarely photograph the surrounding neighborhood (except for sweeping vistas captured

66

from the rooftop) and almost never photograph local inhabitants. UrbExers effectively unmoor the abandoned building from any social life with its adjacent community. In doing so, they do not envisage the realities of living with industrial ruins. "Locals" may infiltrate the blog post if they have infiltrated the building or impeded the Explorer's project. "Locals" may also be referenced as a piece of the building's history, but only in their previous lives as industrial workers, rarely in their present situation.

mANVIL 's *myspace* post "ruin and rust part 3" demonstrates what happens when place and community collide for the Urban Explorer in a West Virginia steel town. mANVIL admits, "rarely do I experience the abandoned places I go on a personal level. I usually enter a place from the perspective of a tresspassing [*sic*] explorer. Beyond a google search to get the history & location of a subject, and viewing what was left behind, I rarely know or truly understand the story behind these places." For the first time, "story," other than recounting his own short-lived encounter with a building, infiltrates mANVIL's project. Armed with his camera and tripod, he aimed to capture photos of the abandoned section of Weirton, but instead, a "local" captured him. In his longest myspace text, mANVIL narrates his encounter with "people more 'real' than any other place I can think of":

> I parked at the end of the road and got my camera out for a quick picture of what
> looked like an abandoned row home. The door opens and a guy in his late 40's with
> a thick russian accent screams "you there, what are you doing taking pictures, come
> inside my bar and have a drink". I don't really know what to say so I tell myself what
> the hell and go inside what turns out to be the dive-i-est dive bar I have ever
> experienced. The bar opened the same year as the mill (1901) and had been in this
> guys family ever since. It's got broken windows, trees growing out of the roof and

67

the only patrons were 3 or 4 old steelworkers who had lost their jobs when portions of the mill shut down. They were amazed we were here to take pictures and so for the next couple hours I pounded beers and exchanged stories of adventure with my new friends…Let me tell you these guys are relics to the industrial age as much as any factory is. Many of them never having traveled outside the rust belt in their entire lives. Things are pretty bleak in this town: the economy sucks, the crime rate is high, and the Steel Mill which was the lifeblood of the area is on the fast track to being completely shut down…But everyone there had a strange sort of simple, positive and hopeful attitude. As I was about to leave a little old lady comes into the bar selling Jars of homemade soup for 1$ each to raise money to help keep her church from closing down. It was probably the saddest thing I've ever seen in my life and I got about as close to crying as my stoic nature allows (it was that bad). Needless to say I bought a couple jars (turned out to be damn good soup) and headed out. On my way to the car I saw a church (couldnt tell if it was active or abandoned) that had…YES…ANVIL STAINED GLASS WINDOWS. I couldnt believe it.

Figure 1.15: mANVIL. "anvil church." In "ruin and rust part 3." Photograph. *myspace*. 21 Nov. 2007. Web. Accessed: http://www.myspace.com/manvil34#!/manvil34/blog. [Website no longer available.] 20 Dec. 2011. Photograph.

Despite his expressions of respect and empathy for the "real" individuals mANVIL met in the bar, he chooses not to include them in his photographic project. The serendipity of his encounter intimates that the ex-steel workers and the old woman are much like found objects: fortuitous and accidental discoveries of things that persist in a collapsing place. Their story becomes blog-worthy because the ex-workers embody the same perceived qualities of the steel mill itself: as long-suffering witnesses to devastating change, but with a will to survive. Nonetheless, mANVIL merely annexes the community's compelling story to photos of the Weirton steelworks, so large that it embraces "both sides of the main street." He posts one portrait – of himself posed in front of the "anvil church." As the final picture in the album, this photo carries the weight of summation: mANVIL aligns himself with strong steel workers in their vocation of making. He continues their lineage of industrial labor through the time, energy, and creativity he devotes to his project – as industrial

adventurer, documenteur and historian. Once more, the Explorer and his building are the privileged subjects. Stories about local "surviv[ors]" make compelling captions, but the façade of the building and the face of the Explorer ultimately define the significance of place.

Chapter 2 – Creative Destruction with a Vengeance:
Displacing Blame in Rust Belt Fiction

Narrating the Era of the End

My foray into Rust Belt fiction began with industrial ruins: How does contemporary fiction confront and appropriate this damaged landscape? John Patrick Leary claims that ruins photography "fails to tell a complete story," proving itself incapable of answering the fundamental question that ruins demand, "What happened here?" Can literary fiction fill this gap? How has literature interpreted the meaning of industrial ruins as "a complete story"? If ruins photography fails to communicate, what can narrative itself, in the form of novels and short stories, tell us?

Searching for literary representations of these provocative places, I found several instances in canonical 20th-century U.S. proletarian literature. In Thomas Bell's 1941 novel, *Out of This Furnace*, the Dobrejak boys "inspect the ruins of an old sawmill" – a passing reference, symbolizing the disposability of labor just as Johnny returns to the steel mill after a failed strike (250). Richard Wright's 1940 masterpiece, *Native Son*, presents the far-ranging effects of urban industrial ruin as Bigger Thomas takes shelter, commits murder, and hides from police in the abandoned warehouses enclosing his neighborhood. These images of abandonment and decay manifest the enduring, embedded destructive forces of the power elite that threaten the working class. In proletarian literature, industrial ruins constitute "landscapes of power," which sociologist Sharon Zukin describes as a combination of material sites and ideological visions, both shaped by capitalist

economic forces. Have the industrial ruins that feature in more recent literature, following the waves of factory closures in the 1970s and 1980s, inherited this symbolic legacy of manifesting working-class oppression?

I took ruins as my first clue in pursuit of stories about the aftermath of industrialism and the cause of its spectacular decay. Following economists Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, I make a fundamental assumption that industrial abandonment "doesn't just happen"; it results from deliberate decisions to disinvest. Whatever the market criteria justifying a factory's closure, "[c]onscious decisions have to be made by corporate managers to move a factory from one location to another, to buy up a going concern or to dispose of one, or to shut down a facility altogether" (15). Yet, these deliberate actions prove difficult to plot. Industrial investors play a numbers game far removed from the lived realities of work. By the 1970s, corporate decision-makers had largely displaced themselves from the manufacturing sites they managed, on which working-class communities relied. This physical distance contributed to a psychological distance enabling managers and executives to disclaim responsibility for industrial workers. According to author Charles Baxter, such dissociation of actions from their consequences "humiliates the act of storytelling" (5). If so, how has contemporary fiction managed these humiliating conditions – the rifts and displacements that, Steven High argues, are so essential to "the development of industrial capitalism"? (*Industrial Sunset* 90). How does realist literature account for the absent causes of industrial ruin? In what follows, I explore the "dysfunctional narratives" that American authors have staged in the Rust Belt, where guilt obsessively circulates in the absence of narrative closure (Baxter 5).

Not unlike the material landscape, ruins have proliferated in the twenty-first-century literary landscape of American novels and short stories. Industrial ruins feature prominently in Michael Collins's *The Keepers of Truth* (2000), Richard Russo's *Empire Falls* (2001), Bonnie Jo Campbell's

American Salvage (2009), Philipp Meyer's *American Rust* (2009), and Chris Tusa's *Dirty Little Angels*
(2009). I have used these texts to construct a new analytic category: Rust Belt fiction. Much like my
own investigation, these novels and short stories take ruins as their point of departure (most begin
with vivid descriptions of ruins on page one). Curiously, they dramatize neither factory labor nor the
events of decline and shut-down. Instead, the irrevocable end of industry is an unnarrated,
uncontested given. In distinct contrast, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) recounts the fall of the
Levovs' glove factory during the riots of the 1960s. With a similar teleology of ruin, Robert Ward's
Red Baker (1985) follows the title character from his last day in the rod mill of a Baltimore steel plant,
through his illicit schemes to earn money, and concludes with his resigned reflections on his "dying
neighborhood" (205). These novels depict the end of an era. Rust Belt fiction, by contrast, narrates
the era of the end.

If history "in ruins" is a key concept for understanding Urban Exploration, then a crucial
aspect of Rust Belt fiction is its "postindustrial" stance. Sherry Lee Linkon classifies Meyer's
American Rust as "deindustrialization lit," which suggests that the process of factory closure will
figure into the dramatic arc of this literature ("And Their Children After Them 102).[1] However, this
is not the case. Instead, I place the aforementioned novels in the category of "Rust Belt fiction"
because they present rust and ruin as their opening gambit. This literature does not narrate industrial
labor or deindustrialization (as in UrbEx, these processes are bracketed to the past). In contrast to
the ruins depicted in UrbEx blogs, Rust Belt fiction's literary ruins do not make history "available,"
allowing the past to reveal itself so the Explorer can partake. In Rust Belt fiction, ruins are present

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[1] See also Linkon's "Men Without Work: White Working-Class Masculinity in Deindustrialization Fiction (2014).

but not accounted for, and their unquestioned presence disconnects this literature from its predecessors in critical proletarian fiction.

Spectacular wreckage eclipses its own backstory. Highly visible and immediately perceived, industrial ruins become new grounds for narrating "what happened" to the Rust Belt. Persisting in the absence of big business, the conspicuous presence of abandoned buildings lends them an aura of agency. These ruins lose their identity as "consequence" and become a new "cause," standing in for the same forces that produced them. This chapter will not treat ruins at length but instead use them to illuminate a historical (and narrative) crisis in the Rust Belt and its fictional figurations.

Although Rust Belt fiction seems, scandalously, to ignore the histories that gave rise to industrial ruins, I argue that this literature pursues the consequences of industrial labor and deindustrialization through displaced crime narratives situated amidst the ruins. My chapter will investigate these graphic mysteries, in particular how they navigate capitalist contradictions in order to locate guilt and achieve closure. Fredric Jameson argues that the "contradictory inner logic and dynamics of late capitalism" produce narrative entanglements requiring "imaginary resolutions" (*The Political Unconscious* 42, 77). Narrative offers a means of coping with these intolerable incongruities, such as the disjoint between material production (the "use value" of factories) and changing market norms (the "exchange value" of labor). In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson deplores

> the very nature of cultural change in a world in which separation of use value from
>
> exchange value generates discontinuities of precisely this 'scandalous' and extrinsic
>
> type, rifts and actions at a distance which cannot ultimately be grasped 'from the
>
> inside' or phenomenologically, but which must be reconstructed as symptoms whose
>
> cause is of another order of phenomenon from its effects. (26)

Industrial ruin is a pre-condition of Rust Belt fiction, the "symptom" of an originary violence that surfaces indirectly. Displaced crime narratives manifest the novels' industrial unconscious as they fixate on gender performance and tropes of embodiment to work through the traumas of labor and shut-down. This quest to grasp what happened – and indict the guilty party – represents a quest for narrative closure following the abrupt severance of industrial work.

In this chapter I establish some parameters for analyzing Rust Belt fiction that I hope will open this emerging body of texts to scholarly inquiry. Christine Borne Nikras, the editor of *The Cleveland Review: A Journal of Rust Belt Literature*, uses regional criteria to define a "Rust Belt literature," situating it in "this region… known more for what it used to make than what it makes now." According to Nikras, the core ingredient of this genre is "the postindustrial Midwest as the backdrop or theme" (23). Yet, these criteria fail to illuminate the work that rust and ruin perform in the genre. My analytical framework for Rust Belt fiction hinges on both presence and absence – on the foregrounding of industrial ruins (both buildings and bodies) so spectacularly present that they obscure their own origin stories. Presence vs. absence, displacement vs. replacement (and, as I discuss later, dismembering vs. remembering) are the dialectical engines of the Rust Belt's literary dramas.

The archives of "deindustrialization lit" and "Rust Belt literature" that Linkon and Nikras have respectively assembled overlap with my own sense of the growing Rust Belt canon. However, by focusing on themes (Linkon, for instance, traces the trauma of deindustrialization as a family affair) but affording scant attention to formal strategies, they neglect the more complex engagements of realist Rust Belt literature. In what follows, I explore two novels' aesthetic "strategies of containment": literary methods that compensate for the narrative distortions imposed by late capitalism, in its displacement of agency from its damaging effects (*The Political Unconscious*). Apart

75

from their common landscape of ruins, these twenty-first-century novels appear incomparable. Richard Russo's *Empire Falls* has received high acclaim for its masterful depiction of a New England manufacturing town coming to terms with economic change, while Michael Collins's *The Keepers of Truth* has sustained substantial criticism for a lack of sophistication and structural coherence.[2] Much as abandonedamerica and mANVIL work in tandem in the previous chapter, so too do *Keepers* and *Empire Falls*. I begin my analysis by locating these novels at opposing ends of a narrative spectrum; while Russo's novel performs a virtuosic series of narrative closures, satisfying the reader's queries with definitive answers, Collins's text does a tailspin, collapsing into a confusion of unresolved questions. My readings invert the prevailing critical judgment of these texts, as I question what Russo's aesthetic resolutions imply and demonstrate how *Keepers*'s narrative collapse deftly narrates the impossible task of telling a "complete story" about industrial ruin. Characteristic of a crucial strand of Rust Belt fiction, both novels respond to the displacement of accountability by re-placing a single capitalist at the site of the crime: in the Rust Belt.

Domesticating Global Capitalism in *Empire Falls*

 Empire Falls, winner of the 2002 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, was written by Richard Russo while he was living in Waterville, Maine where the Hathaway Shirt company was still in business. The story takes place in Empire Falls, a company town similar to Waterville but already succumbed to industrial flight. The novel re-tells the town's industrial history microcosmically, through the tangled stories of two families: the Whitings, the town's factory patrons, and the Robys, working-

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[2] For instance, see Maggie Galehouse, "Rust Belt Blues: Stuck in his dying hometown, a man investigates a mysterious disappearance" (2002). Galehouse remarks that, "As Bill [the narrator/protagonist] fumbles around the breaking news [of a missing man and his severed finger]…the reader fumbles along beside him, trying to figure out what kind of a novel Collins has cooking. A thriller? A mystery? A twisted love story?" (F15).

class people employed in the Whiting-owned businesses. Massive economic changes are accounted for by focusing on family as not just the locus but also the genesis of intra-community violence and decay. Even more, local drama displaces the political and economic origins of deindustrialization and replaces them with small-town, domestic narratives: a love affair punished by a scorned wife's elaborate and sadistic revenge. Russo achieves this displacement by converting capitalism into characters – not absentee forces, but actors still present on the scene.[3]

Empire Falls renders industrial history legible through a chronicle of the Whiting family, whose men figure as haughty but savvy entrepreneurs married to vengeful women who only desire to bring them down. According to Miles Roby, the middle-aged protagonist who works at the Empire Grill owned by Mrs. Whiting, "the wealth and vitality [of Empire Falls] had been bled dry by the generations of a single family" (Richard Russo 61). From the outset of the novel, he ascribes the town's economic stagnation to the Whitings' business decisions; they are a tangible antagonist responsible for destroying this one-industry town by selling its only factories. Unlike the provincial folk who surround Miles and myopically hold out for the factories' return, he has a firmer grasp on global capital dynamics. When rumors spread that new investors have been touring the defunct textile mill, Miles mocks his neighbors' naïve fantasy of its reopening:

> Hey, it's clear to me. They came to invest millions. For a while they were thinking
>
> about tech stocks, but then they thought, Hell, no. Let's go into textiles. That's
>
> where the *real* profits are. Then you know what they did? They decided not to build
>
> the factory in Mexico or Thailand where people work for about ten bucks a week.

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[3] While Steven High notes in *Industrial Sunset* that by the 1970s, "civic capitalism" was on the decline, the "concurrent rise of national capitalism" signified a "loss of local economic control" (8). Although an increasingly global "industrial capitalism cut the ties between corporations and localities…making the single-unit manufacturer an oddity in most industries" (90), Russo bases the downturn of Empire Falls on a vindictive local factory owner.

Let's drive up to Empire Falls, Maine, they said, and look at that gutted old shell of a

factory that the river damn near washed away last spring and buy all new equipment

and create hundreds of jobs, nothing under twenty dollars an hour. (25)

Miles' précis situates the industrial ruins of Empire Falls in a larger context of capitalist

profit motives, global economic restructuring, and the planned obsolescence of factories in older,

unionized towns. Yet this brief acknowledgement aside, Miles ultimately displaces the town's

economic failures onto Mrs. Whiting, locating in her a singular villain who stalled the town in a state

of ruin. In so doing, he stands for the novel as a whole: gesturing toward larger forces of economic

oppression, but ultimately ascribing them to the periphery of an intensely localized drama; as Miles

points the finger at Mrs. Whiting, the novel offers no compelling alternative to explain the town's

widespread decline. Through such extreme personalization of deindustrial history, *Empire Falls*

proves egocentric rather than sociological, adopting a childlike vision of dramatic structural change.

As personal narratives override the distant causes of factory closure, Russo inverts the trajectory of

proletarian literature that Caren Irr establishes: "U.S. proletarian fiction," she argues, "is premised

on the projection of long-standing local conflicts onto a national screen" (147). *Empire Falls*, by

contrast, has centrifugal force. By re-making deindustrialization into a personal decision, the novel

drastically simplifies the dynamics of factory closure by disconnecting them from the world system

and contracting the scales of economic restructuring to trite, local melodrama. The novel ultimately

attributes industrial decline to a personal vendetta.

Russo's Fierce Fordist Female

From the novel's outset, Mrs. Francine Whiting plays the role of a surrogate mother to Miles

Roby. His own mother died from cancer, and Mrs. Whiting has kept Miles's family afloat by

maintaining the unprofitable Empire Grill with Miles as manager. He ascribes this benevolence to Mrs. Whiting's "vague affection" (339), yet she has a castrating presence: "what the woman seemed to convey to Miles was a kind of sexuality…It was sexual inadequacy, he realized with a shock, that he'd felt when she looked at him" (247). Miles senses this threat when Mrs. Whiting teaches him to drive. Noting his fear of the car, she tells him to "floor it" – to test his "power and control" (249). This is Mrs. Whiting's mantra, the values by which she conducts her business and social relations; she is obsessed with power and imbued with overt sexual aggression. Hinting at Miles's incompetent driving, she confirms that, "Absent any knowledge, will remains impotent. A limp dick, as it were" (61). She is a grotesquely sexualized Fordist who stays in residence at Empire Falls to exercise "power and control" over the working-class people "beneath" her, disciplining them beyond the bounds of the factories. This power dynamic shapes Mrs. Whiting's social life, but her business decisions are motivated by her desire, not for an economic payoff, but for "payback." As the novel naturalizes Miles's perspective, it becomes difficult to tell which is determinative: Miles's castration anxiety or Francine's crude show of power. Rather than a realistic character, Francine feels more like a projection of Miles's anxieties about his economic and personal failures. His localization of blame in a discrete antagonist serves as a personal "strategy of containment," displacing his anxiety onto this bizarrely aggressive woman.[4]

Whereas in the real world of global capitalism, companies relocate factories to cut costs, in Empire Falls, Mrs. Whiting shifts manufacturing to Mexico to cut ties between her husband and his mistress. The plot ignites when Mrs. Whiting's husband, C.B. – an industrialist whose self-interests

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[4] Russo contrasts the post-industrial femme fatale – Mrs. Whiting – with Miles's mother, Grace Roby, a deceased industrial worker. Grace embodies a long-suffering working-class femininity associated with 1950s America in its masculine industrial heyday. Beautiful, self-effacing, and devoted to her son, she embodies maternal self-sacrifice. Grace also delivers community support by caring for Mrs. Whiting and her "crippled" daughter. If Miles's mother personifies empathy and the tenderness of community-feeling, then Mrs. Whiting represents a ruthless Fordist pragmatism. Francine represents a female-version of the industrial forces that continue to hold the former industrial Empire Falls in their vice.

revolve around "a life of poetry and fornication in Mexico" rather than business advancements – has an affair with Miles's mother, Grace. This momentous event reverberates through the industrial fate of the town (11). As soon as Miles (and his mother) return to Empire Falls from Martha's Vineyard, where Grace and C.B. consummated their tryst, rumors circulate that the Whitings' shirt factory will close. Grace then receives the news that C.B. has moved to Mexico to launch another mill, part of "*Whiting Enterprises International*" (310). This timing suggests that Mrs. Whiting opened a maquiladora factory to expel and punish her husband for his infidelity. It is later revealed that Francine initiated the deal to sell Empire Textile to "the subsidiary of a multinational company headquartered in Germany," which "heavily mortgaged every existing piece of machinery," exacted brutal concessions from its workers, and let the mill deteriorate before abruptly ceasing assembly despite productivity gains. The narrator stresses Francine's agency, having supplanted her husband: "Only a few understood the new family dynamic, in which Francine Whiting held the real power. She, not her husband or her father-in-law, had brokered the sale of the mill, quite possibly, some whispered, with the complete understanding of Hjortsmann's ultimate intention" (343).

Francine functions as a metonym for industry. She sold off the mill to punish C.B. and Grace, but like the labor baron of a company town, she keeps Grace as "a captive labor force," by employing her as a nurse in the Whiting home.[5] When Grace's body submits to the strain of this labor, she conveniently has no health insurance (since the mill closed), and Grace becomes totally dependent on Mrs. Whiting. To Russo's credit, these circumstances are a shadow representation of the dependent relationship industrial workers experienced with the factory. Health care, pension plan, lifetime employment, future jobs for progeny, continuity of place – all in exchange for their industrial labor and industrial discipline in an unwritten but assumed contract. Francine's personal

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[5] See Zukin's discussion of industrial discipline in company towns (62).

vindictiveness replaces the role of corporate disinterest with a grotesque female villain. Mrs. Whiting, with her scorn, and C.B., with his love life, substitute for more complex capitalist dynamics, which are only hinted at in expository paragraphs. Bypassing theories of disinterested capital, Russo invests Mrs. Whiting with a jealous thrill in destroying Miles's family and – only as collateral damage – the town of Empire Falls. This misogynistic narrative strategy consolidates culpability for industrial decline, giving Miles (and Russo's readers) a convenient antagonist to blame for the anguish that factory closure caused Miles's family. What does the efficacy of this strategy reveal? What do we as readers lose when Francine steps in to embody larger economic forces?

The narrator notes that "the realization dawned [on the mill's laid-off workers] that they were the victims of corporate greed and global economic forces," but these remain abstract – invoked but never dramatized (343). Within the story-world of *Empire Falls*, "corporate greed and global economic forces" act out in the person of Mrs. Whiting. When Miles confronts her in front of the abandoned textile mill (she was giving a tour to foreign investors), Francine confirms for Miles that "Payback is *how* we endure, dear boy," adding "before you say another word in anger, for which I should have to punish you, you'll want to stop and consider not just your own future but your daughter's…And of course there are your brother and the others who depend upon the Empire Grill for their admittedly slender livelihoods" (435). This woman embodies a villainous ethos – a sociopathic revenge logic that the novel uses to explain the economic decisions that shape (and decimate) an industrial town. The impersonal, incomprehensible logic of capital disinvestment becomes clear and present in the scapegoated figure of Francine Whiting.

<u>The Narrative Payoffs of "Payback"</u>

Eliding a single character with the forces of global capitalism proves tangled. This elision implies that capitalism operates like a woman scorned and hungry for payback. Or it mirrors Miles's own coping strategy, the "dysfunctional narrative" that he has invented to justify his Rust Belt existence. I suggest that the decision to close the factories afflicts Miles's family so intensely that it *feels* like "payback." Through the figure of Francine Whiting, Russo demonstrates how people process the contradictions of capitalism (the incommensurability of abstract cause and its very real effects): by interpreting their experience as a personal affront. They take it personally because the disinterested narrative of pragmatic capital gains cannot match the intensity of experiencing shut-down firsthand. The novel not only endorses but actualizes Miles's projection of guilt by centering the plot on a factory femme fatale. Containing the blame within this conspicuously despicable character, the novel excises her in a disturbing but apparently cathartic resolution. By punishing Francine's grotesquely sexualized body, *Empire Falls* exacts something like "justice" for the social damage wrought by industrial divestment.

Russo delivers a moral reckoning at the novel's end. Like water dispatching the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, Russo lets loose a flood that kills Mrs. Whiting and destroys the posh businesses that were established in the factories she sold. As Russo sends Francine down the river, she gets demoted to the "ghoulish" spectacle of "a woman's body glid[ing] by in the raging water…bump[ing] along the upstream edge of the straining dam, as if searching for a place to climb out and over" (483). As the waves toss her lifeless body (denying her "power and control"), an emergency worker notices "a red-mouthed, howling cat" straddling "the corpse" (483). This vaginal image constitutes the novel's "finishing move." Delivering a crude final retort to Francine's previous "limp dick" proclamation, the novel banishes her from Miles's life (and Empire Falls). She's sent

down the river, and this cathartic move concludes the novel. By resolving the threat of economic restructuring in this small way – by degrading and dispatching one woman – the novel itself points to what Miles (and the novel itself) cannot explain on a larger scale. By localizing blame in the figure of Mrs. Whiting, *Empire Falls* fails to acknowledge the physical and psychological distance separating capital and labor. We cannot, *Empire Falls* demonstrates, reach through the personalized, the local, or the domestic to grasp the abstract and impersonal dynamics of late capitalism.

Questionable Evidence: History Inferred from the Spectacle of Ruins

Collins published *The Keepers of Truth* in the U.S. in 2000, the same year his novel was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize in the U.K. On its Scribner cover, author Colum McCann touts *Keepers* as both a "witty homage to the noir American thriller" and a "socially-conscientious novel" (qtd. Collins 1). *Keepers* follows the basic plot-line of a popular-fiction thriller. Bill, the first-person narrator recounting this story from the vantage of the past, is the heir to a defunct refrigeration empire somewhere in the Midwest (the town is based on South Bend, Indiana where Collins attended Notre Dame[6]). Bill's grandfather, known as "the ice monster" for his obsessive desire to promote his legacy of labor, founded the town as an industrial center. When Bill's father takes over the company, he faces increased competition, the prospect of laying off his workers, and the stresses of outsourcing to Asian sweat shops; these pressures drive him to suicide. When Bill's father kills himself, the town also loses its industrial patrimony. It degrades through violence and decay. At the story's opening, in the late 1970s, Bill is a recent college grad, returning to the family mansion that overlooks his wasteland empire in order to write for the local paper, *The Daily Truth*. Bill believes

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[6] During my interviews with the author, Collins repeatedly "slipped up," referring to Bill's anonymous town as "South Bend."

that he can wake the town from the "insomnia of disaffection" that has overtaken it as a consequence of deindustrialization – finally "a story equal to his ideas": how we lost "the collective solidarity of what we once were as a nation" (74, 28, 262).

Most Rust Belt novels navigate the landscape of industrial abandonment through a writerly focal character with the insight to see through the malaise or false hope that living amidst ruins breeds.[7] These characters have a privileged perspective; they seem less reactive to the ruins and more reflective about them. They also have a predilection for literary analysis, which allows them to serve self-reflexively as mouthpieces for the authors or as reflections on the power or limitations of storytelling. Bill, like *Keepers* itself, searches for a narrative that will allow him to clarify – and convince his neighbors – that they are "casualties of our former industrialism" (72). By invoking noir conventions early on, Collins sets expectations that the murder he plots will be resolved – that the crime is traceable from the evidence, and the culprit can be brought to justice.

The engine of Collins's plot is a dismemberment murder: it begins with finding a piece of Old Man Lawton's finger after a missing persons report is filed by his ne'er-do-well son, Ronny. Bill, who fancies himself "a man of interpretation," assumes the role of detective trying to piece together who dismembered the former factory worker (306). Dominating the novel's beginning are the trappings of a noir-esque whodunit transplanted into a macabre postindustrial setting. But even before we learn about the missing finger on a dark and stormy night (literally), another mystery lingers in the background. The reader perceives a mystery underlying the very setting of the town. It is the fundamental question that Leary poses in "Detroitism": what happened here?

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[7] *American Rust* features the young genius, Isaac, and his Yale-graduated sister – young intellectuals who often reflect on the significance of the Rust Belt; Miles Roby in *Empire Falls* had wanted to become a literature professor; and *Dirty Little Angels*'s Hailey Trosclair is a lover of books who sees *too* clearly (trop clair) the social degradation in her devastated industrial quarter of New Orleans).

However, no one in the novel, including Bill, can explain what happened – "what they'd been through over the past decades" (244), "when things got bad and the town went to hell" (97).[8] Ed, a former industrial journalist and now photographer for *The Truth*, offers vague aphorisms about a collective failure of belief: "In God We Trust. It's all about belief. We stopped believing at some point" (29). Bill dismisses this transfer of blame as "that veneer of philosophical understanding" (249). People in town accept the decay that surrounds them as if it speaks for itself. The events that led to this wreckage remain unquestioned, as if their cause could be taken for granted.

Yet Bill has a lot to say. The newsroom where he works looks out over "the debris of our dead industrialism," so Bill has the remains of his family's legacy always in sight (30). His vision of this aftermath inspired an "Ode to a Trainee Manager," an ironic paean to the new generation of service workers and dissolute youth who "contaminate" the once-proud landscape of industrial labor. In his canny "Ode," Bill offers a desperately nostalgic portrait of his town's proletarian history, but withholds any explanations. Describing a static vision of labor, he proclaims that

> Our men used to manufacture cars, sheet metal, mobile homes, washers and dryers,
> frame doors, steel girders for bridges and skyscrapers. Our town had contracts from
> Sears and Ford and General Motors. Everybody worked in the factories, bending
> metal into the shape of car fenders, gaskets, engine blocks, distributor caps, sewing
> vinyl seats for Cadillacs and Continentals. We had hands throbbing to make things.
> Factories were our cathedrals pushed up out of the Great Plains. (15)

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[8] In *Dirty Little Angels,* where the destruction of the physical setting is so widespread, the reader might assume that the physical damage in Hailey's, the protagonist's, former meat-packing town was caused by Hurricane Katrina. Not until halfway through the novel do we learn that a wave of industrial closures decimated Hailey's neighborhood. Hailey belongs to the new generation that, growing up after factories had closed, has become inured to widespread decay and shows no interest in what caused it.

Collins opens the novel with a tableau of Bill's town before the precipitous fall of industry and after, when "a plague befell our men, as horrible as any of the plagues that fell on Egypt" (15). Irony and exaggeration weave these disparate scenes together. Bill seems unable to name what happened in the interim, so he relies on overblown descriptions, as if the vehement intensity (a sheer enthusiasm) of detail could compensate for the lack of explanation. The transformative events are unnamable (incomprehensible but also unknown – shadowed, it seems, by a lack of accountability, the absence of someone to blame, and no closure), so they bleed through into the present. In spite of the "ideas" that Bill spouts about the de/industrial past, the novel does not offer a compelling answer to the mystery of what happened; "instead of achieving closure," the novel fixates on ruins, as "the story spreads over the landscape like a stain as we struggle to find a source of responsibility" (Baxter 7).

In his "Ode," Bill furnishes overdrawn descriptions of the wreckage that "stains" his town after the unnameable crime of industrial collapse: "Rusting fire escapes lead to stairways to oblivion and darkness. There are prehistoric-looking machines dragged out into yards, cannibalized of anything of worth, carcasses of industrialism. Our daughters spread their legs on shop floors where once our men pounded steel" (17). In his descriptions of both the past and present, the focus remains on men. Bill doesn't stray far from the myth of self-made men – that local industry was single-handedly founded by his grandfather, a former Russian peasant. Whether Bill describes industry or ruins, both are coded male. He portrays a male experience of industry and of ruin, reminiscent of the selective historical narratives proffered by many Urban Explorers. Collins frames industrial history and the Rust Belt landscape in terms of men: their vocation and their affliction.

Yet how did Bill's rehearsed story of heroic masculine labor lead to this wreckage? Is Bill's "smokestack nostalgia" – a nostalgia so un-nuanced, uncritical of industry as an institution – grounded in any sort of reality, or is it a defensive response to the present state of wreckage? Is the

86

devastation so spectacular in its immediacy that this material "evidence" thwarts our ability to trace it back to its sources? Bill inflates the heroism of industry so that the intensity of its "goodness" can match the intensity of fear and "contagion" he perceives in the present (94). Bill provides an odd accounting as he drives through the old industrial section of town. Surrounded by massive industrial ruins, he feels overwhelmed by the aftermath of deindustrialization. Once again, he presents us with a spectacle, describing the ruins with overt tourism/art metaphors – as "a Museum of Industrial Demise…admission was solely to give up your personal safety…Each broken window was a framed portrait of failure, a gallery to defunct industrialism…" (92).[9] Bill cannot isolate the cause of this devastation. The spectacle of wreckage has replaced the inexpressible history that produced it.

Industrial failure is so closely linked to the fear and violence that ruins propagate for Bill (his immediate safety concerns), that his ability to deal with distant causes falters. In his accounting, cause-and-effect relations become confused; they merge. He alternates between describing the danger he associates with the ruins – "give up your personal safety" – and the extinction/decay of industry – "defunct industrialism…tool and die machines rusted out" (92). He alternates between describing the violent people who occupy the ruins – people he imagines "…devouring me" – and the hopeless men abandoned by industry – those who "couldn't face themselves anymore" (93). "It was plain and simple," Bill explains, "a jungle of creeping graffiti down here, a virus stealthily moving outward…mansions now abandoned, the virus winding its way around the white pillar coliseums of absentee industrialists who had escaped…" (93). The graffiti is a synecdoche for the dangerous youth that Bill fears will attack him: not individuals, but a fearsome landscape that connotes poor, young, aggressive people. In Bill's "plain and simple" account, their graffiti – visible signs of the decay they herald – suggestively transforms into the force that drove out the

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[9] Like UrbExers, Bill has more respect for the inhabitants of the town in the era of their labor than now.

industrialists, as if the financial-backers "escaped" town in response to this virus of poverty, since their mansions are "*now* abandoned" (93, *emphasis mine*). It seems more likely that the industrialists abandoned their posts, enabling the taggers to take over. The threat of violence that Bill currently faces displaces the violence wrought by the industrialists, particularly since they inflict this violence in absentia/by their absence.

Nothing happens in this opening description (it presents Bill's fear-tinged reflection on the degradation of industry and community), but he infers a story from the sight of the buildings – a history in which graffiti drove out the industrialists. In this strange disjuncture of cause and effect, the relation between signs and sources of destruction is skewed. Narrative certainty is troubled. At this point, I question how well Bill (as both journalist and "detective"; he is our in-situ reader) can reconstruct what happened.

The sight of ruins leads Bill to pontificate on the lonely, despairing men who, he imagines, become violent after losing their jobs. The focus remains on the men themselves, not the source of their devastation. Bill complains that "there wasn't that editorial overtone of political and personal crisis. The political was eclipsed in our America," yet he does not lay blame on the industrialists – as a way of consummating his political complaint – except for citing that they "escaped" the incursion of dangerous poor people (93). Bill laments that "The pall of death was everywhere along our Rust Belt, an infestation of poverty, seemingly hopeless" (94). Yet, what is the cause of death? Is it the flight of industry, or the transformation of community (the incursion of the poor moving into these communities, and the descent of the middle class)? Does "the pall of death" – the physical destruction of industrial buildings and the obliteration of the culture and history of industrialism – originate in the poor who are "infest[ing]," invading and taking over, the Rust Belt? Bill's tirade

88

diverts the central question of this mystery thriller from "Whodunit?" to "Who is to blame?" ("Who will pay?")

Though readers may dismiss *Keepers* as simply a heavy-handed novel, it bears out the challenge of narrating the "political and personal crises" of the Rust Belt when the symptoms of these crises are (in) ruins. I argue that the novel proves representative of the broader genre I'm describing, just with the volume turned up. What seems like narrative excess and over-dramatization in *Keepers* is not so far removed from the ways other contemporary writers dramatize what it means to be post-industrial. *Keepers* helps clarify these moves by making them conspicuous. (Rust Belt fiction is not subtle – it's filled with heavy-handed metaphors – but it doesn't always pursue their implications). Bill's rhetoric feels overly dramatic, and its romantic excess and melodrama recall Matthew Christopher's early blog entries.[10] *Keepers* feels comparable to literary HDR. Yet this overblown style makes certain aspects of Rust Belt fiction clearer, more overt. The novel captures, in a single text, the issues of industrial residue (as residual culture) and ambivalence that other Rust Belt fiction grapples with less explicitly. Ultimately, I argue that Collins's novel itself resembles a "ruin," and its narrative ruins are as revealing and provocative for me as material ruins are for Urban Explorers.

Manly Brawn and Manly Breakdown: Manifestations of the Industrial Unconscious

Keepers, typical of Rust Belt fiction, confines industrial labor and the history of factory closure to the past and establishes from page one that we're dealing with postindustrial people.

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[10] Bill's overblown rhetoric very closely resembles Collins's own journal entries as he road-tripped through the postindustrial Mid-west in the 1980s. Excerpts from these entries are available on his personal website, *Michael Collins: Author and Ultra-Marathoner.*

Industrial labor represents a prior history that these texts do not directly dramatize but cannot ignore. Reading Rust Belt fiction reveals how the legacy of industrial capitalism persists, even in the absence of factory work. "The invisible hand of capitalism" still shapes the lives and minds of Rust Belt residents. The characters in *Keepers* treat the ruins as if the ruins speak for themselves. All but Bill seem to ignore these places or dismiss them as "all this" "out there" (106). Yet the ruins do not represent an unspoken, agreed upon past; rather, they bespeak *unnamable* histories – stories buried in the unconscious of Bill's former industrial town. These unnamable conditions (the social relations and power dynamics characteristic of industrial capitalism) break through to the postindustrial era, erupting from an industrial unconscious. This unconscious allows the novel and its postindustrial denizens indirectly to process the traumatic histories that the ruins, ironically, eclipse. As I argue later in this chapter, *Keepers*'s submerged history of industrial violence and capital flight is brought to the surface by the two key suspects in Kyle Lawton's murder: his son, Ronny, and Darlene, the local matriarch who profits from a thriving beauty shop, an "affective industry" that rallies local women together. The novel's industrial unconscious registers the lingering traumas of industry and its abrupt departure in two ways. Despite the collapse of industry, Ronny Lawton strives to embody forms of masculinity defined by the industrial era. At the level of community, the submerged violence of industrial history manifests in physical violence perpetrated among Rust Belt residents, even family members. The crime of dismemberment suggestively recalls the brutality of factory labor.

As an organizing trope in *Keepers*, dismemberment translates the abstract, economic story of deindustrialization onto a human scale. It registers distant economic decisions as deliberate and irreparable destruction of the body, breaking down the old industrial generation limb from limb. Through the metaphor of dismemberment, the "crime" of disinvestment becomes painfully legible on the body of the laid-off worker. Kyle Lawton's severed finger reminds the reader that

deindustrialization dismembered working-class men from their defining industrial culture, recalled by the "gray-fingered chimneys down in the foundry-yard" (159).

In the midst of writing about the "Auxiliary Firemen's Wives' Bakeoff" aka "postscripts to a dead town" (20), Bill has an exciting story thrust on him. Local delinquent Ronny Lawton files a missing persons report on his father, Kyle. The story grows more exhilarating when "the police found a small piece of finger out at the Lawton place" (33). Influenced by the news story that Bill constructs, the whole town assumes that Ronny is the murderer. Bill imagines a salacious headline: "FATHER FINGERS SON FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE" (33). Whereas Kyle Lawton worked for General Motors – part of the generation in which "Everyone worked in the factories…bending metal into the shape of car fenders" (15), Ronny "dropped out of school at fifteen, ain't never looked back on learning again, worked at Arby's, Burger King, stint with the military, discharged without seeing any active duty, then back home to a job at Denny's as a short-order cook" (34). Assuming that Ronny killed his father suggests that the new generation of trainee managers has severed itself from the generation of its fathers, "our men [who] used to manufacture cars," "our men in stained yellow T-shirts," "our men out in the fields behind the factories rounding bases," our men: "The keepers of industrialism" (15-16). These men "were all hands," but the new generation has not only broken from this 'honest,' hard-working past but brutally destroyed it – mutilating the hand, the agent of industrial men's individual and collective power, the symbol around which their identities coalesced.

In Bill's eyes, the finger, "bent in this morbid, accusing manner," indicts Ronny Lawton (38). It appears to point to the basement, where Ronny's weight lifting equipment is stacked, along with "bits of paper everywhere, pasted to the walls, the self-affirmation, the singular incantation of his whole being: 'Get Big!'" (39). Ronny is a "monstrous figure in a white chef's hat," a man who would

have taken his place in the factories (220). His turgid torso looks ridiculous, even pathetic. Ronny brutalizes his body, fashioning it into the shape of productive labor: a physical presence and power that he couldn't develop by working as a short-order cook in a fast food restaurant (this work is not empowering). His physical size recalls the power – and strain – of demanding factory work.

Through weight lifting, the old norms of masculine physical power persist even when their traditional justification – industrial production – has collapsed. This persistence may result from a lack of closure in facing the apparent end of industrial masculinity. Ronny doesn't have the work that would shape his body to this ideal of manhood. His version of masculinity – the appearance of hard labor through compensatory pumping-up – only makes him more ridiculous in his fast food uniform. After Ronny gains some celebrity as a suspect in his father's murder, he enters "in negotiations" with Bob's Big Boy as if he were a factory union rep in talks with management (81). The aesthetic of male labor that Ronny embodies becomes, in its postindustrial translation, grotesque.

The climax of the novel stages a confrontation between Ronny and a mob of his fellow Rust Belters. Surrounded by a "grotesque pageant" of neighbors calling for his death, Ronny takes his estranged wife and infant son hostage (Email interview). Holed up in his family's house, his "last stand" consists of furiously bench pressing (pumping iron instead of bending steel): "He was suffocated, it seemed like…and then from somewhere deep inside him, he found the strength, and up came the bar…It was like looking at a guy who had literally lifted the weight of the world off his shoulders" (289). As a show of power, Ronny has recourse to the idealized hard body. Flexing his pecs, he demands of Bill, "You ever seen anything like it?" (289). All of a sudden, Ronny's infant son starts sucking on his engorged pectoral. Collins, who was inspired by *The Grapes of Wrath* (a novel Bill cites during a drunken tirade about "the loss of solidarity" [262]), here inverts the

conclusion of Steinbeck's novel in which Rosasharn takes a starving old man to her breast. Steinbeck's scene of solidarity and sustenance across the generations starkly contrasts with Ronny's futile physical labor. He cannot provide for the next generation. As Ronny's young son suckles at his inflated pectoral, feminizing his father, the baby ultimately takes no nourishment from Ronny's strength. Ronny's 'hard labor' amounts to futile straining after an image of idealized industrial masculinity.

The masculine industrial body (Ronny's turgid torso, the workers' "hands throbbing to make," and Kyle's castrated finger) constitutes in *Keepers* what Gerard Manley Hopkins named "an obsessive image" – "memorable because a crucial part of [its] meaning has been stripped away from [it]" (qtd. Baxter 40). I contend that the meaning missing from our understanding of the worker's body (either nostalgically idealized or grotesquely torn apart) is the interpretive context of industrial labor – the proletarian stories of hard, hazardous work that *Keepers* only hints at. The violence of heavy industry (what Janet Zandy describes as the "reduction" of the worker's body that offsets productive labor) is not remembered, neither by Ronny nor by Bill, neither of whom ever worked in a factory (Zandy 176).[11] Nevertheless, the bodily effects of this identity-defining work – the corporeal size and power it demanded and also its potential for maiming and death – materialize in *Keepers*'s Rust Belt town in residual forms/through residual violence. The masculine body shocks and disturbs Bill, as Kyle Lawton's body is unearthed piecemeal and Ronny's skin tears with his excessive weight-lifting. As an obsessive image, "the origin of the shock is protected" by the characters' disconnection from proletarian experience, but the legacy of this potentially lethal, life-shaping labor persists.

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[11] In *Life and Labor: Dimensions of American Working-Class History*, Walter Light cites "the ever-present threat of accidental injury or death" that manual laborers face in heavy industry (106).

In his opening "Ode," as Bill recalls the industrial era, when "our furnaces bled against the snow," when "the machines of our existence ate the night shift," he never pictures human labor (15). Not himself a member of the working class, it seems that Bill never saw people perform manual labor. In his "Ode," the factories themselves become corporeal. The furnaces bleed, as the machinery strains to meet production quotas, but the workers are "all hands": a body of men in full possession of their making-power. With no sense of alienation from the products of their labor, they make the nation's cars, appliances, and the steel for skyscrapers – as if these men built the power of the nation with their own hands (15). Bill's nostalgic vision of industry reflects his, and perhaps Collins's own, severance from the world of hard labor. Bill sentimentalizes masculine industrial work and, in so doing, he allows himself to deny the violence of industry.

By opening with a romanticized "Ode" to manly work, *Keepers* severs itself from the classical proletarian novel, which "delivers an explicit critique of industrial violence and corporate power" (Entin 69). Despite the violent corporeal metaphors Bill uses to describe the factories, he fails to acknowledge the brutality that workers bodily endured. Through Bill's casual remarks about working-class resistance ("one of those riots in the late sixties, when people didn't know what the hell to make of this country" [286]), Collins vaguely references the terrain of proletarian literature. But does he forget the legacy of this literature in portraying worker violence (in *Christ in Concrete*, *Yonnondio*, *Out of this Furnace*, and *Blood on the Forge* to name a few of the most canonical examples)? Or does his novel make a (rather compelling) claim for our disconnection from the lived realities of labor and deindustrialization, and instead portrays the consequences when this violent prehistory does not, due to the rifts and contradictions of late-capitalism, allow us to re-member its power?

The dramatic structure of *Keepers* hinges on the search for culpability, with the hope of laying blame and bringing a personified culprit to justice. At a fundamental level, this is a search for

94

narrative closure. Kyle Lawton's dismembered hand is symptomatic of the community's inability to "re-member" what fractured it. The working class cannot remember decisions, motivations, and events that broke it apart because the proletariat rarely, if ever, has access to these causal connections; a person cannot recall what s/he never knew in the first place. *Keepers* portrays this absent, inaccessible history as a physical act of violence – a crime that is only visible in its aftermath, rather than as a clear sequence of events with distinct actors. Collins's detective-story schema plays out Frederic Jameson's theory of symptoms and absent causes, and demonstrates how cultural narratives struggle to cope with rifts between agency and consequence. At a certain point, it seems, Bill's community no longer questions (or forgets to question or gives up questioning) what happened to it. Besides Bill, no one in *Keepers* is phased by the ruins.

Bill responds to Kyle Lawton's dismemberment by playing the detective and seeking who committed this crime. In this chapter, I perform my own detective work by investigating how *Keepers* uses the trope of dismemberment to navigate the contradictions of capitalism. By re-figuring deindustrialization as a brutal bodily crime, Collins makes a move much like Russo and replaces the agents of violence (absentee capitalists) with post-industrial proxies. He thereby creates a distance of time, space, and social class between these (latent and manifest) figurations of "the criminal" responsible for industrial ruin.

In *Keepers*, the metaphor of dismemberment bridges the personal and collective consequences of post/industrialism. The surface story (its manifest content) pursues the driving question of who killed Kyle Lawton. Driven by the engine of a conventional whodunit, the novel also builds suspense more reminiscent of the hard-boiled detective story, in which guilt spreads beyond a single individual and blurs the boundaries between victim and perpetrator, hero and villain. *Keepers*'s underlying story (its latent content) questions who deserves blame for the destruction of

industry – and the decimation of its masculine culture – and, a different question entirely: who will pay?[12]

Against its backdrop of anomie, the novel traces how a submerged history of violence erupts within the community. As a means of connecting local, individualized violence to a larger context of deindustrialization, Collins links men's ravaged bodies – Kyle dismembered, Ed decaying from illness, and Ronny consumed by fire – to the decimated industrial landscape. By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that dismemberment is a problematic metaphor, since it requires a physical, embodied agent of violence to accomplish it. Unlike the decay of a mill, dismemberment is not a crime-by-neglect; it requires an agent of violence physically present on the scene. Physically displaced from Bill's Rust Belt town, the corporate managers who closed the local mills are no longer there to blame. Collins's dismemberment plot requires a murderer. The novel endorses the claim that a capitalist is at fault, since Ed's wife, Darlene (who becomes Bill's prime suspect), embodies the new service industry. She is an emerging capitalist, a woman growing an empire and, like Francine Whiting, a discrete figure who can serve as both a symbolic and literal agent of violence against working-class men.

The Proletarian Legacy of Lost Fingers

In Michael Collins's *The Keepers of Truth*, the trope of the severed finger, which long predates his novel, harkens back to politicized proletarian literature.[13] This literary history injects itself into

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[12] See Heta Pyrhonen's insightful entry on "Genre" in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (2007).

[13] "Through the 1920s," notes cultural historian Richard Bak, "the loss of fingers was the most common cause of permanent disability [at the Packard motor company], especially among shaper hands and punch-press operators." Stunned by the frequency of dismemberment, author Erskine Caldwell named Detroit "the eight-finger city" (23). More recently, in the era of the Operational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the protagonist of Leslie Feinberg's 1993 *Stone Butch Blues* nearly loses a finger to a die cutter machine.

Collins's metaphoric crime, breaking through the *post*-industrial significance of dismemberment to indict the masculine industrial culture that the novel seems to mourn. The history of productivity is also, we learn, a record of repressed or casually accepted violence. The tacit explanation (that industrial capitalism perpetrated this violence) is, I argue, the "latent content" in this displaced crime story. From this perspective, Rust Belt fiction makes us more aware of how blame has been distributed in dubious ways to explain industrial ruin. Industry has an endemic violence (revealed in *Keepers* by Bill's casual references to the abuse of women, the industrial baron's attack dogs, and the brutal drudgery of industrial labor in the era of high productivity).

The severed hand, far from reinforcing Bill's sentimental vision of industrial labor as communal, empowering, masculine hand-work that is now – in the postindustrial era – being destroyed, actually underscores the dehumanizing violence of productive labor and its culture of masculine dominance. This violence does not originate in, but rather persists in sublimated ways into, the postindustrial era, when there are no industrialists left to blame. The severance of the worker's social and narrative agency, I argue, represents the persistence of capitalist exploitation even after factories have fled.

If the thriller genre is driven by suspense, what happens when the suspenseful uncertainty of the crime cannot be resolved? In *Keepers*, the crime around which the story revolves is overdetermined. In fact, Kyle Lawton's severed index finger presents a larger problem of indexicality (identifying relations of cause and effect) in the Rust Belt. Detective stories try to restore the connection between cause and consequence via analysis and narrative reconstruction, but in *Keepers* the severance of the laid-off worker's pointing finger has myriad potential causes. We are presented with the finger as a piece of evidence – the only real clue as to what happened to Kyle Lawton. But, as a trace of the crime against the laid-off worker, *which* crime does it point to?

97

Does it point, as Bill suggests, to the new generation severing its ties to an ennobling past (a trans-generational crime)? Does it point to women overtaking men – or exacting revenge on them (a gendered crime)?[14] Does it point to the physical harms of industry itself, undermining Bill's romantic vision of factory labor? The latter explanation signals Bill's own severance from a lived experience of work, but it also draws the violence of factory labor back to the narrative surface, suggesting that the abusive power of industry persists in sublimated form within the post-industrial community (a legacy of crime). Do these possible explanations compete with or complement each other – illuminating or obfuscating the pursuit of culpability?

The severed finger presents the narrative crisis of the Rust Belt inscribed on the no-longer-laboring body. Ultimately, this problem of indexicality points to a lack of agency: the worker's inability to indicate (leading to the reader's inability to interpret) or to indict. Kyle Lawton's dismemberment represents a violent denial of his personal and political agency; a bold figuration of violence, the act of severing Kyle's finger has deprived him of the ability both to indicate what happened to him and to indict someone. The trope of dismemberment suggests the very problem of interpreting it (the trope "points to" its own inability to point fingers. This disconnect creates a crucial obstacle to interpretation, highlighting the irony of "truth" in Collins's title. At one point, Bill assails "the multiplicity of interpretation that dismantles meaning" [264]). How do we solve a crime with so many plausible suspects? Where do the traces of an overdetermined crime lead us? And where do they lead us astray? In other words, how do we interpret what the ruins – both social and spatial – actually index?

The town seizes on the "generational crime" by interpreting the severed finger as evidence that, as Bill fears, "Our history was not secure. It was disappearing before our eyes" (94). According

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[14] In this way, the severed finger would point to crucial displacement: the shift of culpability from industrial capitalism to women (from abstract economic forces to an embodied antagonist, who is not ultimately the *source* of violence).

to Bill, the craftwork culture he projects onto once-active factories has been destroyed by "an infestation of poverty" (94). Just as the "great horde of people, good people" working swing shifts in the old warehouses has, in Bill's mind, been replaced by "a tumultuous horde [threatening to] encircl[e] the car like a shifting microbe and devour me," (92-3), he assumes that Ronny Lawton – "the white trash I was dealing with" (163) – has killed off his honest, hard-working progenitor. The generation of trainee managers, including the aggressive youth who "slink amid these ruins, scale the chain-link fences, rip the copper piping from the factories, sell it" – the same youth who "spread their legs where once our men pounded steel" (16) – typify the community's self-destruction: the young generation destroying the integrity of middle-class identity. Bill exclaims, "There's an indignation in this country at what has happened to us. We need to exact a brutalizing punishment, indiscriminate and horrific, upon ourselves. We like to see ourselves mutilated. It's part of our psychosis of dismemberment, deregulation, downsizing, cutting things" (41). Bill, our resident reader, interprets the novel for us: "I was thinking in terms of sentences, in terms of drama, of these rusting machines [cars on blocks, broken lawnmowers, and discarded appliances in the Lawton yard] as part of a chaos, where a man deconstructed himself by dismantling everything around him until one day he turned and cut his own father into pieces" (46).

However, as Bill loses the Lawton "scoop" to an up-and-coming female news anchor, his suspicions make a pointedly gendered shift – from Ronny the emasculated trainee manager to Darlene, a prominent business woman with a suspiciously close relationship to Ronny Lawton's wife, Teri, a client in her beauty shop. Darlene reveals to Bill that Teri was beaten by Ronny and raped by his father. This backstory suggests that Teri served as Kyle's revenge against his son for usurping his place as man-of-the-house after Kyle lost his job at the sheet metal factory. Bill suspects that Darlene colluded with Teri to murder Kyle and frame Ronny for his death, so that "the principal men implicated with Ronny's estranged [wife] would kill one another in a domino effect of

fate" (317). This interpretation of the crime against Kyle acknowledges a prehistory of violence: a criminally misogynistic industrial culture, to which Bill casually alludes. In his "Ode," Bill sexualizes industrial labor, including the exploitation of women by working men. He describes workers – always men – with "hands throbbing to make things," suggesting that sexual dominance was a crucial component of men's industrial identity (15). Their aggressively phallic mode of work included an "allotment of whores down by the vast labyrinth of viaducts and foundry cooling pools…for men who needed it" (16). Bill does not flinch at the mention of female prostitution, which he seamlessly incorporates into his halcyon portrait of industrial labor. "Whores" were an accessory to this gendered world of work, much as Teri is an accessory to Kyle's violent assertion of his masculine power after losing his job. Identifying Darlene as a prime suspect in Kyle's murder transforms his severed finger into a figurative castration, a fitting form of revenge for a legacy of abuse against women. This interpretation complicates the "whodunit" plot by blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator. By framing Kyle as both victim and aggressor, and Darlene as both a raging capitalist and avenger of the misogynistic culture that sustained industrial manhood, *Keepers* struggles to isolate which crime it attempts to solve.

As Bill gains a greater sense of Darlene's economic success, her business savvy, and the size of the community she commands through her "affective industry," she emerges as a larger threat. Darlene, the shrewd capitalist whose glamor photography business appears to have displaced the menswork of heavy industry, intimidates Bill with a pair of hair-cutting scissors, wielded by her conspicuously "big hands" in her husband's garage, the male den-turned-beauty shop. These scissors recall the gardening shears that Bill suspects were used to dismember Kyle Lawton. Identified with the scissors, exuding success and a suspicion of men, Darlene embodies Bill's castration anxiety. Much like Francine Whiting, Darlene's girlish name belies her hidden power. Linda, the bombshell newscaster, also partakes of this "feminine" social power. With legs like scissors, she commands an

audience that "eclipsed anything Ed or Sam [the editor] or I could ever achieve, the long scissors of her legs opening and closing" as she closes-in on the Lawton story (230).

Through a displacement of blame, *Keepers* attributes the castration of industrial workers' social agency to women. As gendered power dynamics shift through economic restructuring, women prosper in Bill's Rust Belt town. We first hear of Darlene from her husband, Ed's, description of how she saved them financially. When Ed wasn't making money as an industrial photographer, Darlene "saved his ass, saved their house" (30). She steps in as an entrepreneur when Ed isn't man enough to pay the mortgage. Darlene's economic prosperity undercuts the fantasy of the self-made man – a sort of masculine automotive auto-genesis – that Bill presents in his "Ode."[15] Surpassing the men in town, Darlene's massive physical presence provides a perfect figure for their castration anxiety. She claims a presence – social and physical – that men no longer can. Much as Ronny's size harkens back to the large male bodies of industrial workers (with a "bigness where the skin shines over the muscles" [276]), Darlene is hyper-embodied. Like Ronny, she is described in the same terms as Bill's car – "that accessory of my manhood" (105). Her "bigness" recalls the cars that local men "built with that American swagger of audacious power and bigness" (257). She has a tremendous physical presence that overpowers that of her physically beleaguered husband (Darlene's Mary Kay pink is "the same pink as Ed's antacid medicine" [101]). Even when Ed praises her, she disciplines him: she "seemed to turn her girth toward him and admonish him into silence" (98). As Darlene's body grows in girth, so does her business, and so does her community of women. She gets bigger (fatter) and more powerful as her husband shrinks through illness. Through not only her size but her success, she has violated the entrenched gender dynamics of the industrial economy.

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[15] Bill's grandfather founded most of the industry in town, then bequeathed the refrigeration empire to Bill's father. There are no (surviving) women in their family – just a line of "self-made" men who did not depend on women in order to produce (their goods).

Feminine Industry: A New Castration Threat

Driving to Ed and Darlene's house for a barbeque, Bill must pass through the old industrial part of town – a "Museum of Industrial Demise" (where "masculine" could easily substitute for "industrial"). Driving through industrial ruins to reach Darlene's successful suburban business, Bill's route charts a historical trajectory for the town's changing economy. Bill describes Darlene's home-grown business in explicitly industrial terms that establish her as a founding mother of feminine industry, filling the role left by Bill's grandfather. Whereas "Our town [once] had contracts from Sears and Ford and General Motors," Darlene has a contract with Mary Kay (15, 98). The new economy appropriates the structure of masculine labor. It's "a world of feminine machinery…a tangle of snaking cords" (not unlike the labyrinthine scaffolding of the factories) (101). Bill evaluates Darlene's shop as "an intoxicating world of hair spray…like a toxic dumping ground of female inadequacy in there" (251). Earlier, Bill had described the buried toxic legacy of industry: "the great corporations that dumped and spilled with impunity, that poisoned us…a hidden killer that went airborne …a horror that went into our genes…[as] cancer… deformed our children…[turning us into] casualties of our former industrialism" (72). Darlene's feminine enclave is filled with chemical toxins, but they're dismissively linked with "female inadequacy," rather than corporate violence.

Darlene has established "a psychological domain of dreams and longings" that tap into her clients' dashed American dreams (101). She sells fantasy-lives to Rust Belt residents, through prom dresses (complete with life-narratives) and exotic backdrops. In so doing, she has transformed her husband from industrial photographer to glamour portraitist. The people in town have lost their grip on the American Dream and, in a symbolic space of "what had once been Ed's garage, Darlene had resurrected the hidden longings of a generation of the downtrodden…extracted their dreams…a voice whispering, 'You can be anything you want'" (103). Her machines do not produce a tangible

product, but an image that stands in for experience. (Just as Ronny's muscles give the appearance of masculine productivity, Darlene's portraits give only the image of a comfortable middle-class lifestyle). The beauty parlor is a dream factory, and Darlene is "that conjurer of desire" who eases your anxiety only to sell you more "services" (105). Darlene is a Rust Belt opportunist. Her business profits from men's misery, with her clients "…telling me how things weren't so good for them…man trouble…men all shriveled up and feeling worthless" (98). To help her female clients (who suffer from/through out-of-work men), Darlene offers "service[s]" such as "Car Theft," which involves secretly stealing and cleaning the boyfriend/husband's car to suggest that he has a secret admirer (99). This suggestion of desire, it's hoped, will validate the men's sexual appeal, leading to "trickle-down effects" in the bedroom (Nikras 124). There's something absurd about how Darlene systematized this scheme, called "Car Theft and a Pedicure," recalling the mechanization and standardization of industry that, Ernest Mandel asserts, "now penetrate[s] into all sectors of social life" (Mandel 191).

More immediate than lurking historical menaces, gender performance becomes a stand-in for the distant economic forces that form and deform industrial communities. As they advance within the new economy of services, women in Rust Belt fiction become scapegoats for emasculating de-industried men. Having overtaken men in body, business, and bonding, women such as Francine and Darlene become surrogates for the "castrating" effects of factory closure. If Darlene and her cohort of women are the "true" murderers in *The Keepers of Truth*, then the latent narrative behind the murder shifts from the destructive legacy of industrial capitalism to gender antagonism. *Keepers*'s battle of the sexes draws attention away from the power dynamics of late capitalism and, much like *Empire Falls*, concentrates culpability for industrial ruin in the perceived threat of the feminine. Although both Bill and Darlene desire to protect Ronny's estranged wife

103

from his abuse, they cannot come together. Instead, they form adversarial camps: with the genders linked to different communities, industries, and eras.

After Bill visits Darlene's beauty shop and sees the women flourishing as a community, he begins not only to suspect Darlene but to believe that a conspiracy of all the local women have colluded to kill Kyle. Baxter confirms that "conspiracy works in tandem with narrative repression, the repression of who-has-done-what" (Baxter 7). In distinct contrast to local men, who have retreated into themselves – "men not communicating anymore, men all shriveled up and feeling worthless," Bill notes how women have collectivized to share the pain of industrial ruin (98). Referring to Teri's rape, Bill confides to his boss that "All the women out there knew, Sam. There's something strange out there. I swear to God there is" (257). He admits, "I felt threatened by that collection of middle-aged women." Under the pretense of getting a haircut, Bill ventures into Darlene's beauty parlor to confront her as a prime suspect. Yet his attempts at interrogation backfire, "what with the physical size of Darlene circling me with a pair of scissors" (252). As "[h]er big hand took my jaw," Bill fears that he might be "killed by a goddamn beautician and her cohorts" (253, 256). Whereas "our men," in the aftermath of factory closure, lose their work-based community and devolve into a "dark solidarity of losers" – the women unite (75). Their bonding makes a striking counterpoint to the men's social isolation. However, in Bill's reflection, feminine solidarity becomes more than a foil for the dis-memberment of men's industrial culture. Women become shears- and scissors-wielding agents of dismemberment.[16]

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[16] According to Sherry Lee Linkon, "For well over a century, the physically demanding, often dangerous productive labor of manufacturing and mining provided economic and social resources that were central to white working-class masculinity: a decent wage that helped secure men's position as head of the household, arduous and sometimes risky activity, appreciation for physical strength, pride in producing the materials and goods that defined American economic dominance and prosperity, and shared experiences that created masculine networks not only at work but also in neighborhood settings – bars, union halls, football fields – where workers' relationships extended into social life" ("Men Without Work" 149). Darlene and her contingent of female friends have all of these things: Darlene is the bread-winner and clearly the decision-maker in her marriage, in her stature (albeit one more rotund than muscular), she towers over her husband and physically intimidates Bill (and may very well have dismembered a man), she demonstrates a pride in

Taking their ascendancy within the new service economy becomes tantamount to castration. These women are more adaptive, imaginative, and entrepreneurial than the left-over workers. The postindustrial "twilight time" in which *Keepers* takes place presents a threatening shift in power (94). Even as Bill sits in Darlene's beauty shop, reading her women's magazine, he notes the articles proceeding from "how to make a man want you, a recipe for pineapple upside-down cake…and how to open your own business and achieve financial independence" (252). Women are overtaking men and in so doing severing their "feminine dependence" on husbands and boyfriends. They effect this break by severing the hand, symbolic of men's industrial power and dominance – the source of their agency as metal-bending, nation-building workers.

Bill's conspiracy theory betrays a displaced apprehension about the loss of masculine prowess in the wake of deindustrialization. However, a persistent ambivalence undoes the women's culpability and undermines their villainy. By portraying a community of long-suffering women, physically and emotionally abused by generations of post/industrial men, Collins recognizes a certain justice in the women's revenge plot. Hailing the female community as "a synod of moral reckoning," Bill admits the social violence that masculine industrial culture perpetrated against women (305). Darlene is made utterly grotesque, but her beauty parlor is a haven for "the dispossessed and injured, the abused, the raped." Her affective industry is the grounds of an "underground resistance, the triage of longing, women rescued from the hell of abuse" (306). These women have not forgotten the violence that industrial culture entails. They represent the under-class, sometimes brutalized by men, now taking a stand against their history of oppression. The

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making (making people beautiful; Darlene's glamour-photo business is like a "dream factory"), and her community of women has grown stronger through the trials of deindustrialization. In *Keepers*, as in *Empire Falls*, women become a substitute force of dismemberment – a substitution that skews the gender dynamics of industrial power and agency by scapegoating women. Bill's descriptions of union-busting by his father and grandfather suggest that their factory's anti-union animus dis-membered this male work community even when work was abundant (94, 123).

novel portrays Kyle's "castration" by this female community as punishment for the violently

misogynistic working-class culture that used and abused women before and after industrial closure.[17]

If Kyle Lawton raped Teri to punish his son, then Darlene's "crime" is not only her usurpation of

masculine industrial power as the new capitalist matriarch. Rather, her symbolic castration of Kyle

Lawton represents the revolt of the underclass – a righteous retribution that undercuts the

romanticized vision of industry that inaugurates Bill's story.

   In *The Keepers of Truth* and *Empire Falls*, gender is a means of working through the

unnameable histories of industrial ruin. Yet, parsing "what happened" to the Rust Belt through the

lens of gender creates entanglements of cause and effect, victim and perpetrator, and the justice of

crime and punishment. Gender norms prove essential to the narrative crisis of former industrial

communities rendered in Rust Belt fiction. In this emerging literary genre, we need to examine

gender in order to understand the consequences of narrative displacement and the "containment

strategy" of scapegoating.

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[17] Bill's father kills himself after witnessing the violence of outsourcing in Southeast Asia. Traumatized by the horrors of exploitation he witnessed – "this population of small kids strapped to the backs of women" – he laments that Bill's "generation would live off the backs of women and children" (172, 173). These paternal last words suggest that the Conrad-ian "horror" of outsourcing represents an abuse of women so intolerable that it drives the factory owner to suicide. And yet, the industrial masculinity portrayed in *Keepers* has always relied on the dominance of women. When Bill laments in his opening "Ode" that "Our daughters spread their legs on shop floors where once our men pounded steel," this apparent degradation of the factory seems actually to continue the illicit sex that was practically institutionalized as an aspect of labor (17). Cut off from the factory-work that sustained their manhood, laid-off men try to reclaim their masculinity through sexual predation. Now that the factories are closed, local all-night diners are filled with "the kind of men who prey on cashiers…they leaned in like jockeys…watching the waitresses, looking at legs" (75). These men "resume their solitary existence baiting sad females of our species" (79). If Darlene is a "synod of moral reckoning," then the violence she orchestrates is revenge for the way that post/industrial masculinity has always sustained itself *on the backs of women* (305).

Rust Belt fiction addresses the unnameable forces of factory closure indirectly, by sublimating it into narratives of corporeal violence perpetrated within the Rust Belt. I suggest that these novels cannot name the "direct" causes of deindustrialization because these capitalist forces operate from a distance both social and spatial, displaced from the people whose livelihoods and local institutions depend on them. In Rust Belt fiction, violence within the community plays out in bodily terms the violence that capitalists commit, through economic means, when they downsize, shut down, and abandon factories and their communities.

The trope of dismemberment in Rust Belt fiction allegorizes the indefinable process by which capitalism (in the form of hazardous industrial labor as well as the abrupt severance of work through capital flight) fractures working-class selves and communities. Collins registers the severity of this social violence by inscribing it on the body of a (former) worker, much like a long tradition of proletarian literature cites the violence of class struggle on the worker's person. In the Epilogue to *The Keepers of Truth*, Bill confirms that the crime of deindustrialization is a cold case: "The corpse of Ronny Lawton's father was never found, his death remains a mystery, unsolved" (311). By allowing this dismemberment to persist, *Keepers* mirrors the Rust Belt community's inability to re-member the complex history that, as Bill puts it "closed our factories [and] killed our town" (311). As detective fiction, *The Keepers of Truth* seems a poorly designed mystery, since "what happened" remains not only unsolved, but unsolvable. The submerged history of proletarian violence – the destructive effects of industry through the eras of productivity and closure – bursts forth in the local community, but it cannot be captured and "contained" by a coherent narrative. Collins's novel takes us no closer to nabbing the culprit; however, its unresolved efforts to define the crime and locate culpability highlight the challenges of plotting a contemporary history of the Rust Belt. More so than

Russo's tightly crafted novel, *Keepers* illuminates the crisis that Rust Belt communities face as not only a lived material crisis (surviving economic failure, institutional abandonment, the decay of infrastructure), but a lived narrative crisis as well.

Chapter 3 – Bridging the Post/Industrial Break in
Mark Nowak's *Shut Up Shut Down*

What do I think of Urban Exploration? You mean, "Infiltration"? Take the train station in Detroit [Michigan Central Station]. It's part of people's reality. But too many infiltrators and celebrities – Johnny Knoxville and whatever – treat it like the equivalent of a dive bar. I watched the Buffalo train station from the front windows of my grandparents' house. That was my grandfather's workplace and community. I used to get candy there when I was a kid. My relationship to the train station is different from 99.9% of "Explorers." I have a deeply personal relationship with these places; they're not just "visually or graphically interesting" to me.

- Mark Nowak

When I interviewed documentary poet Mark Nowak in 2010, he adamantly distanced himself from Urban Explorers. Unlike the opportunistic UrbExers, thoroughly content with – even celebrating – the status quo of decay, Nowak presents himself as an activist. Eschewing what he calls "Marxism from the neck up" ("Neoliberalism" 23), Nowak affirms that "the practice of scholarship must go hand-in-hand with on-the-ground political projects" (qtd. Metres). On Nowak's CV, these include spear-heading the successful unionization of a Borders book store; founding the Union of Radical Workers and Writers; and organizing poetry workshops in public schools, prisons, and union halls. These "on-the-ground political projects" support Nowak's oft-stated goal of opening poetry-writing to a wider public. In this activist model, poetry encourages disenfranchised people to imaginatively resist institutional power. However, much of Nowak's own poetry appears to contradict his mobilizing efforts, for it implicates working-class people in the institutionalized violence of capitalism. Contrary to Nowak's proclaimed sympathy for working-class interests, his

on-the-ground projects of "imaginative militancy" coincide with an ambivalent poetics. In *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004), Nowak's photo-text poetry charges workers as complicit in their collective defeat.[1]

Figure 3.1: Nowak, Mark. "3." In "June 19, 1982." Photograph. Nowak, *Mark. Shut Up Shut Down*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004. p. 68. Accessed: 5 Oct. 2013. Scanned photograph.

The immediate evidence of this defeat comes through Nowak's photos of (post-)industrial ruinscapes. In each of his three books, Nowak pairs his poems with close-ups of abandoned buildings, forming a montage of sights and scripts. By focusing on industrial decay, these photo-texts emphasize the degradation and immobility of (former) industrial communities. In *Shut Up*, 25

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[1] Nowak engages in "imaginative militancy" to empower rank-and-file workers with "empirical" and "qualitative" tactics for inciting change. Such tactics range from creative writing and "poetry shares" in the lunchroom to more aggressive "Luddite practices." During the Borders bookstore unionization, these included "*de-stickering*," "*mis-shelving*," and "*editing* store stock" by replacing high-demand books with small-press titles. See Nowak, "Imaginative Militancy and the Transnational Poetry Dialogue" (2012). See also Nowak, "Neoliberalism, Collective Action, and the American MFA Industry," particularly page 19.

grainy black-and-white snapshots of shuttered industry and boarded-up taverns render their implied

communities as dead space: the brutal aftermath of disinvestment. Reiterating the familiar trope of

"crumbling buildings with no people to be seen," these images fit the bill of "ruins porn," which

focuses on derelict scenes stripped of social, historic and political context (Brook). However, they

don't offer the salacious visual thrill of many UrbEx photos, which penetrate the buildings' damaged

facades, jazzing them up with HDR effects for commercial display. And yet, like the UrbExers,

Nowak manufactures vacant scenes – only, his framing of trashed and deserted landscapes opposes

their tantalizing display. His deadpan portraits of socially-evacuated space clear an opening for

narrative – where his poetry can "restore" the social history stripped from the ruinscape. Specifically,

Nowak invites us to re-read these damaged social landscapes as evidence of longstanding violence

against (and within) the working class.

In three of the five long poem sequences in *Shut Up Shut Down*, Nowak joins his personal

photos of decimated Detroit and the abandoned Minnesota Iron Range to a versified collage of

voices. *Shut Up* quotes deindustrified workers, the corporate elite, Raymond Williams's *Keywords*, a

Cold War-era grammar guide, newspaper and magazine articles, oral history, a documentary film,

Wal-Mart ads, and Bertolt Brecht's 1932 play, *The Mother*. The perspectives that *Shut Up* thereby

invokes are actually reified objects. They are text blocks that Nowak assembles into new relations,

just as he re-situates Rust Belt communities through a montage of ruin photos. Starting *Shut Up* with

these already-reified spectacles, Nowak injects them (back) into labor history and, through the

circulation of his book, introduces them into new networks of association.

Refusing to pigeonhole *Shut Up* as "working-class poetry," Nowak calls his assembly work

"labor history with line breaks" (qtd. Metres). This framing privileges the socially-engaged content of

Shut Up over its form (as Nowak reduces aesthetics to "line breaks"). However, the "breaks" that

Shut Up negotiates between lines, quotations, and pages symbolically align with the breaks inflicted by factory closure – in particular, the historic "break" that characterizes much recent labor historiography. Many oral histories, closure ethnographies, and monographs on deindustrialization cite factory closure as a definitive break, separating a pre-lapsarian era of work from the reigning era of decline.[2] However, *Shut Up* yields a more nuanced labor history. Nowak's poetry draws on the reader to bridge the "breaks" – syntactical, but also historic, social, and material – that both factory labor and factory closure impose. In *Shut Up*, these breaks prove most significant in terms of collective identity: how the "we" of the working class has been fragmented, specifically along the fault lines of race and gender. In pursuing these points, I reclaim the importance of form by arguing that *Shut Up* performs its politics through three distinct formal tactics. At the level of the poetic line, Nowak leads readers syntactically and symbolically from ruins to workers. In individual poems, he presents textual collages whose ruptures and continuities re-stage complex dynamics of industrial labor history. Finally, across his poem sequences, Nowak uses typographic patterns to stake a claim for the collective nature of disparate working-class experiences.

According to Nowak, what separates his approach to urban decay from the "dive" treatment he disdains is a commitment born out of his lived intimacy with Rust Belt towns. Although he never worked a manufacturing job, Nowak labors to establish his working-class roots by declaring that

> I grew up on the east side of Buffalo, the grandson of a woman who dropped out of
> school in fifth or sixth grade to clean other people's houses and eventually became a
> 'Rosie the Riveter' and a Teamster; grandfathers who were steelworkers and train

[2] See, for instance, Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown USA: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (2002); Gregory Pappas, *The Magic City: Unemployment in a Working-Class Community* (1989); and Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (1982).

mechanics; a dad who was a union VP at Westinghouse and a mother who was both

a clerical worker and sold coats at a department store. If we lived in Chicago, anyone

in my family could very easily have been one of Studs Terkel's interviewees in

Working. (qtd. Metres)

Taking Nowak's cue, scholarly critics and web reviewers insist on the authenticity of

Nowak's working-class persona.[3] British experimental poet Piers Hugill offers an exemplary review

of *Shut Up* as a poetic reckoning with the social and structural damage inflicted by union baiting,

strike defeats, and 'runaway factories' in the 1980s-1990s U.S. Before close-reading the text itself,

Hugill testifies that Nowak's "working class credentials are undeniable, and his knowledge of the

region he writes about firmly grounded in personal experience." As Nowak confirms, "I was simply

writing about what I knew" (qtd. Metres). This "authentic" self-positioning has dissuaded scholars

from questioning Nowak's politics or even recognizing his ambivalence for working-class cultures.

In *Shut Up*'s first poem, Nowak dramatizes his first-hand knowledge of working-class culture

by covertly positioning himself in the role of a "listening witness." Readers unfamiliar with Nowak's

biography might not recognize him as the "I" who "scraped (grease, meat, omelettes)" while

listening to "the (former) railroad workers and steel workers (still) bullshitting." Yet, Nowak embeds

a clue to his presence within this scene. In bold-faced text, an anonymous speaker invokes "**Mark**"

as she recounts "**talking about the possibility of Lackawanna** [a steel city south of Buffalo, NY]

becoming a ghost town" (11). This reference to "Mark" works like an oblique shout-out to the

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[3] Nowak's critical reception extends beyond the normal receiving lines of academic poetry. His work has only recently become the subject of scholarly conversations, but he maintains a strong presence on the web – through the journal he edits, *XCP: Cross-Cultural Poetics*, as well as frequent posts to the *Poetry Foundation's* Harriet blog, *ZNet: A Community of People Committed to Social Change*, and his own *Coal Mountain Blog*. My chapter therefore cites established scholars and amateur Web critics, in addition to worker-writers, as important respondents to Nowak's poetry. In so doing, I take a cue from Nowak's expressed desire to "move beyond 'poetry' as an ever more institutionalizing art form and, in a sense, open up its production and reception to the public" (qtd. Wagstaff 462.).

poet himself, as if the speaker quoted above were one of the workers Nowak overheard firsthand as a fry cook at Wendy's.[4] Beginning *Shut Up* with a reference to himself and to a now-defunct steel mill near his hometown, Nowak suggests that he too is embedded in this (textually reconstituted) working-class scene. Portraying himself as a listener, Nowak reinforces his intimacy with the lived realities of deindustrialization and thereby reconfigures his role as documentary poet. Instead of picturing Nowak scouring archives in search of quotations or rearranging blocks of text on his laptop, this poem encourages us to situate Nowak "on the ground." By opening his book with a scene of "listening," Nowak claims an authoritative *threshold* position: attentive to the struggles of laid-off workers, but sufficiently distant from factory labor to critically re-frame their responses.

My knowledge of Nowak's biography – and my interviews with him – inform my understanding of his poetry and activism; yet my readings often contradict Nowak's expressed understanding of his work. By exploring how *Shut Up* took shape through several significant encounters – discovering the decimation of his hometown geography and engaging with an influential photo-book and film – I illuminate the intricacies of *Shut Up*'s experimental form as well as unexplored dimensions of its social critique. Whereas Nowak contends that "*Shut Up* was about the collapse of industry" (Personal interview) I argue that he invokes the ruins (or, in his words, "the fracture, collapse, and disintegration") inflicted by deindustrialization in order to portray a working class *already* fractured (qtd. Axelrod). My argument breaks from a critical chorus that lauds *Shut Up* as an accounting of unemployment's social costs. While Nowak lends **bold** voice to workers' laments and accusations of capital flight, he also punctures these testimonies with quotations criticizing the "lost" era of industrial productivity. The same poems that lambast corporate decisions

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[4] The unnamed speaker is Lynn Cieslica, interviewed along with her husband, Mark, in Frisch and Rogovin's photographic oral history, *Portraits in Steel.*

also incriminate white male workers in racist and sexually-charged breaches of working-class solidarity. By splintering worker collectives from within, these exclusionary male groups were complicit in the break-down of working-class communities – a break-down too often attributed solely to the era of decline.

Understanding these complex critiques embedded in *Shut Up*'s otherwise pro-worker poetry requires that we read (back) across "the post/industrial break." As *Shut Up* attests, a social and historic break unduly segregates histories of labor from histories of shut-down, leading laid-off workers and cultural commentators alike to focus on post-industrial losses, rather than persistent violence. When decline becomes an origin story defining the identity of "Rust Belt" towns, then "pre-histories" of capital violence and labor conflict lost their traction in elucidating the present political situation. The historiography of labor as a before-and-after of decline is another product of capitalism, reflecting its model of "creative destruction." Focusing on various forms of "destruction," my reading of *Shut Up* restores a sense of continuity to industrial labor history by analyzing how the social relations and power dynamics of industrial labor persist into the postindustrial present. My analysis unsettles Nowak's current position within the labor history canon. To re-position him as both advocate and critic of the working class, I question where Nowak locates industrial ruins. Where in time? Where in space? Where in the ledger of accountability? As I will demonstrate, *Shut Up* insinuates ruin where we do not expect to find it – that is, if we glean our expectations from the wave of shut-down ethnographies produced since the 1980s, from documentary films such as *Roger and Me*, or even from Nowak's latest book, *Coal Mountain Elementary*. While these narratives reproduce the capitalist model of innovation and rupture, *Shut Up* skews the progress-driven trajectory and adopts a model of enjambment. By exploring how Nowak enjambs industrial ruins with accounts of productive labor and solidarity, I revise current understandings of the activism that *Shut Up* prefigures and ultimately demands.

<u>Forging Voices into Brick</u>

Since 2000, Nowak has published three poetry collections: *Revenants* (2000), *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004), and *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009), all focusing on the lived experiences of working-class people facing the violence of industrial labor or the violence of its withdrawal. Nowak describes the "multiple voices" at play in these texts as "ethnographic interviews" (*Revenants*), "archival sources" (*Shut Up*), and "testimonies" (*Coal Mountain*) – even as the two "interviews" in *Revenants* were conducted with his parents (qtd. Wagstaff 470). Likewise for *Shut Up*, the archive of materials that Nowak excerpts and re-assembles is highly personal, consisting of both deliberately researched and found documents, as well as his personal experience of deindustrialization in his hometown of Buffalo, New York. Although Nowak describes his source material as "ethnographic interviews" and "archival sources," his first two books prove remarkably lyrical. Ironically, however, this lyricism gets overshadowed by Nowak's biography. Mainstream and online reviewers alike are quick to invoke Nowak's life story, often beginning their reviews with a testament to his working-class credibility.[5] Most often, they cite his childhood in Buffalo and experience as an industrial musician. As one critic proclaims, Nowak's "poetic texts are an eclectic scattering of source material, with Nowak working less in the tradition of the lyric poet than in that of the DJ, sampler, and remixer" (Wagstaff 457). As this representative claim attests, few reviewers acknowledge – and some misinterpret – how Nowak re-mixes his autobiography into the documentary collage poems in *Shut Up*. This is not surprising since the poet himself downplays *Shut Up*'s explicitly lyric moments, as if distancing himself from how personal, even "privatized," *Shut Up* really is.

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[5] See Stephen Burt, "Poetry: Happy as Two Blue-Plate Specials" (2004); Piers Hugill, "Class War in the Rust Belt" (2005); and Steel Wagstaff and Mark Nowak, "An Interview with Mark Nowak" (2010).

In fact, Nowak's next book, *Coal Mountain Elementary*, abandons the lyric entirely. This book cedes the first-person "I" to Nowak's working-class speakers – Chinese and American miners and their families – and reveals the poet's subjectivity (and his creative labors) only in his excerpting, strategic line breaks, and photographs. Nowak explained that "I am less and less interested in single authorship and more and more interested in the potential for new forms of collaboration," which involves "subordinating, reconfiguring, or rescaling my individual aesthetic goals to also encompass the needs of unions, working people, social movements" (qtd. Wagstaff 463). In reconfiguring his personal aesthetic, Nowak dismissed the lyric mode as an exceptionalist subjectivity: a first-person perspective that smacks too much of the I-under-neoliberalism. Yet there is much to be salvaged in Nowak's lyrical reflections.

I venture into the lyric territory where critics have not tread to analyze how Nowak's experiences in Buffalo shaped the form and motion of his poetry and, most importantly, its mode(s) of subjectivity. I begin with Nowak's return to the "ruined hearth," which proved a turning point in his career as a poet. Nowak discovered industrial ruins in his hometown and, concurrently, in the photos of an international architectural photography book – Bernd and Hilla Bechers' *Industrial Facades*. These two visions of industrial ruins impelled Nowak to compose *Shut Up* and to incorporate the sights of industrial ruins into his poetry. [6]

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[6] As a collection of five poetry sequences, *Shut Up* alternates between photo-text poetry and what Nowak refers to as "verse plays." Similar to the second and third photo-texts in *Shut Up*, the two plays ("Capitalization" and "Francine Michalek Drives Bread") consist of three "voices," distinguished by bold, italic, and standard type-face. Instead of the verso: photo / recto: haibun structure of his photo-text poems, Nowak's plays are arranged as a sequence of poetic columns. Nowak forms these columns through strategic line breaks, but the visuality of his plays matters less than that of his photo-texts – where meaning relies so strongly on Nowak's mise-en-page. In fact, the verse plays feature no photos of ruin. Through performance, the bodies of the three speakers stand in for all of the missing actors – workers and invisible capitalists. In a future project, I will explore how Nowak's poetry goes public, becoming a script for three-part performances intended, it seems, to warm-up the vocal chords of the working class. "Capitalization" and "Francine" have been performed in union halls and university theaters; by striking Northwest Airlines mechanics and university clerical workers; by graduate students rallying for unionization; and by Ford workers in the U.S. and South Africa, in preparation for writing their own poems as part of a "trans-national poetry dialogue." The verse plays in *Shut Up* deserve a deeper investigation than this chapter allows. I am particularly fascinated by the heightened class

After finishing his MFA program at Bowling Green State in the late 1990s, Nowak recounts a traumatic realization upon returning to Buffalo. He found "the steel mill where my grandfather worked, with like 35,000 people – gone. The train station where my other grandfather worked – closed. The Westinghouse plant where my dad worked, which probably employed 15,000 to 20,000 people – torn down. I'm in my 30s and everything's gone, boarded up" (qtd. Demko). Nowak frames his shocking return as a crisis of vision: seeing the landmarks of his family's labor history reduced to the remnants of closure and demolition. It was around this time that Nowak also discovered the Bechers' industrial photography.

Published in 1995, *Industrial Facades* is a systematic architectural study of multi-story manufacturing buildings: factory lofts, warehouses, and industrial train depots from Germany to Wisconsin. Between 1963 and 1994, the Bechers traveled throughout Europe and America compiling dozens of these structures, then organized them into a montage of images suggesting a single *type* of building, further suggestive of a shared culture and work experience. Nowak recounts how these industrial facades, both active and abandoned, recalled his personal experiences of deindustrialization, like an architectural madeleine: "I saw the Bechers' photos and remembered places in Buffalo" (Personal interview). In the Bechers' austere rendering, intricate networks of brick catch the eye.[7] Tapestries of brickwork shaped by narrow Roman bricks, patterned brick, and

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consciousness and rallying power that Nowak attributes to women in "Capitalization" and "Francine," in counterpoint to photo-text poems that severely critique the parochialism and violence of white male work cultures.

[7] Dating back to the nineteenth century, brickwork has been a ubiquitous feature of industrial cities such as Buffalo. Marianne Sandrovich, a retired worker from a Pittsburgh-based Westinghouse Electric plant, explained to me that "My hometown [Wilmerding, PA] was built by George Westinghouse. Literally. He built everything from the YMCA to a library to the row homes for the workers and the multi-storied houses for his supervisors. Everything surrounded the Westinghouse Air Brake. And he made everything brick. The Air Brake was huge, and a dark, dirty brick. Even the streets were once cobblestone. All the stores and the houses were brick. Except for the poor on the hill—theirs was wood. I think he wanted the town to look like the ones in England" (Interview).

Playing on the ubiquity of the brick in U.S. industrial cities, satirical newspaper *The Onion* printed a story coyly titled, "Bricks Goddamned Everywhere, Reports Psychotic Study." The study in question was purportedly conducted by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania (based in Philadelphia, an industrial city once known for power generation,

mottled "iron spot" brick texturize the factories' gothic shapes, investing them with a distinct

aesthetic of brick (Bradley 234). The Bechers' attention to brick resonated with Nowak, who was

intimately familiar with the brick facades of Buffalo industry, especially the places where his family

worked: the Lackawanna Steel Mill ("gone"), Buffalo Central Station ("closed"), and Westinghouse

Electric plant ("torn down"). Nowak's family labored in brick.

While Nowak had a disturbing encounter with brickwork wrecked, *Industrial Facades* quietly

celebrates the exterior configuration of the industrial loft, reiterated in manufacturing towns

throughout the West.[8] Strictly controlling the photographic parameters – at each site replicating

exposure times, perspective, neutral lighting, and the central positioning of the building within a

tight frame – the Bechers were conceptual photographers who aimed for an "objective"

documentary view. They documented a newly precarious industrial landscape by visually cropping

industrial buildings out of their local social networks. By arranging photos of the industrial loft in a

serial procession of images, the Bechers removed their immediate social contexts but conferred a

collective identity – and a collective aesthetic – on places otherwise isolated in their local matrices of

production. Aggregating dozens of factory lofts not only signaled the trans-historical and

transnational *presence* of industry but also reinforced a collective patrimony of productivity at a time

when the West's industrial landscape, like Nowak's hometown, faced decay and demolition.

Although *Industrial Facades* poses a drastic departure from Nowak's emphasis on the social disasters

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coal and iron transport, textiles, and ship building). Researchers confirmed that "'no matter how hard one tries, there is no escaping the bricks'" ("Bricks Goddamned Everywhere").

McKeesport, Pennsylvania-born labor historian John Hoerr conveys a graver sentiment in his novel, *Monongahela Dusk*. As Mae Bonner, in a foul mood, contemplates lower Fifth Avenue across from the steel mill, she notes "the meandering brick street walled in by rows of three-story brick buildings with mostly abandoned storefronts. Death in Brick: Mae notices that unlived-in brick seems to wither and crack like a chunk of red Jell-O left out overnight" (57).

[8] The Bechers were renowned for their distinctly formalist approach to documenting a single type of "technological structure" – industrial lofts, gasometers, winding towers, lime kilns, coal tipples, etc. – whose architecture rendered visible the buildings' role within a matrix of production.

of shutdown, *Industrial Facades* shaped how Nowak chose to map labor's struggle. Marking their influence, each poem in "$00 / Line /Steel / Train," the first poem-sequence in *Shut Up*, begins with a direct reference to a specific photo in the Bechers' volume.

The convergence of Nowak's decimated industrial hometown with the dozens of factory lofts collected in *Industrial Facades* spurred Nowak's foray into what he calls "photo-documentary pieces."[9] *Shut Up Shut Down*," said Nowak, "grows out of and becomes the voice of the emptied spaces" (Personal interview).[10] This claim requires parsing. While "$00" cites specific pages of *Industrial Facades*, no photographs make an appearance in this poetry sequence. Though Nowak calls "$00" a "phototext," it fulfills this role obliquely (qtd. Graves). Nowak originally intended for specific images from *Industrial Facades* to precede each page-long poem in his 18-poem sequence. He wanted to replicate the photo-text format he uses in *Shut Up*'s photographic sequences: "June 19, 1982" and "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down."[11] Yet, since the Bechers' copyright privilege precludes public

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[9] In a later interview, Nowak reflected that "Richard Wright's pairing of language and images [in *12 Million Black Voices*] strongly influenced my photo-texts," and that Wright Morris's novels and prose-poems were "probably as influential as any of them" (Skype interview). Nevertheless, neither Richard Wright nor Wright Morris make cameos in *Shut Up Shut Down*, while Nowak opens the book with direct reference to the Bechers' *Industrial Facades*. I chose to investigate the Bechers' influence because it proves more comprehensive. Nowak explicitly engages the Bechers' photos and, as I argue at the conclusion of the following section, he adapted their photographic style to the sight and sequencing of his prose poems.

[10] Nowak, Personal interview, 2010. I find it interesting that Nowak left the identity of these "emptied spaces" ambiguous. By stating that *Shut Up* "grows out of and becomes the voice of the emptied spaces," does Nowak affirm that *Shut Up* brings a needed vocal history to the Bechers' photos *or* to the abandoned industrial buildings that he encountered in *Industrial Facades* and his own hometown? To which site/sight of ruins does "emptied spaces" refer? In drawing attention to this moment of ambiguity, I offer a premise that undergirds a crucial argument of this chapter. My premise is that, through the photo-text relations of *Shut Up Shut Down*, Nowak makes implicit claims about the relationship of working-class people (located in the text) to industrial ruins and, more broadly, to "ruined" industrial towns (located in photos). I believe that Nowak's statement about "emptied spaces" conflates images of industrial ruins with industrial ruins themselves, in part, because *Shut Up* uses photographic images of industrial ruins to invoke (the limits of) real places. At the same time, the uneven power dynamic between photographic and textual representation in *Shut Up* also betrays Nowak's attitude about the capacities of these different media to capture the depth and texture of social experience. With these claims in mind, I will analyze the photo-text dynamics of Nowak's poetry in order to discuss the association (or disjuncture) between photography and writing, place and people.

[11] The third and fifth poem sequences in the book – "June 19, 1982" and "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down" – pair Nowak's personal photos of Detroit and the Minnesota Iron Range, respectively, with page-long linguistic re-mixes.

access through Nowak's poetry, his allusions to the Bechers' photos are by page numbers only: esoteric references to an elusive book. Too specialized to be stocked in most public libraries, *Industrial Facades* can be difficult to obtain even in university systems, and it costs $100 used on amazon.com.[12] Instead of guiding his readers to a widely accessible text, Nowak sends them on an expensive scavenger hunt. Despite (or perhaps motivating) his desire to shift poetry out of the hermetic, "first person singular" frame, when Nowak cites the Bechers' volume, he reproduces their privatized relation to the images. He told me that "readers don't need the book [*Industrial Facades*]; it's just a point of departure" (Personal interview). It's true that Nowak laces a few of his poems with ekphrastic fragments ("Doors torn away in Detroit, 1974" [17]; "'No Parking Anytime'" [26]; "In the back/ground/is the fence—" [27]), improvising poetically from these photographic cues. However, without seeing the Bechers' photographs, all but a privileged cohort of readers miss the reference. Unlike Nowak's linguistic re-mixes – where his quotations index at least a scrap of their referent-texts – Nowak's page-number citations of the Bechers' book remain opaque. He surrogates his meaningful encounter with *Industrial Facades* into bold-faced numbers that, for most readers, amount to dead hyperlinks.

Nowak's project of giving voice to the "emptied spaces" in his hometown, and the Bechers' book, is not immediately obvious to the reader of *Shut Up Shut Down*, largely because the first "photo-documentary piece" in the book includes no photos. Nowak expressed that his poetry will always include both photos and text in a dialectical interchange: "The books will always have that; the images have to be there" (Skype interview).

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[12] Price confirmed on 25 Oct. 2013.
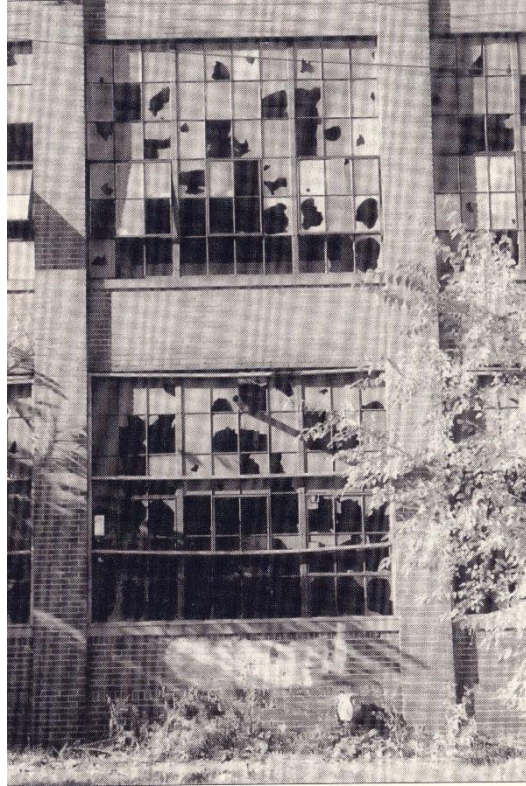
Figure 3.2: Nowak, Mark. "4." In "June 19, 1982." Photograph. Nowak, Mark. *Shut Up Shut Down*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004. p. 70. Accessed: 5 Oct. 2013. Scanned photograph.

In the context of *Shut Up*, this dialectical paradigm might suggest that, in order to understand the meaning of industrial ruins (represented by photos), one must recognize the human costs of disinvestment (revealed by Nowak's "labor history with line breaks"). Conversely, Nowak's dialectic suggests that in order to understand the social distress of deindustrialization, one must confront the ruined industrial landscape. However, *Shut Up Shut Down*'s actual photo-text dynamics reveal a different paradigm. The lack of photos in "$00" testifies that we do not, in fact, need to see decay to comprehend social damage.

Even in *Shut Up*'s two primarily photographic photo-texts, the diptychs formed by static ruins photos and dynamic textual collages have a conflicted relationship. The images in *Shut Up Shut Down* do not invite sustained reflection. Photos of "NO TRESPASSING" signs posted on

pad-locked factory gates, realty placards masking boarded-up storefronts, and various forms of trash accumulating against the facades of industrial buildings in Detroit *shut down* the reader's imagined access to these landscapes. In contrast to UrbEx photos, where smashed windows become thresholds beckoning physical and imaginative entry, Nowak's photographic windowscapes repel any intrigue. Instead, Nowak invests aesthetic force, emotional weight, and communicative power in written accounts of ruin. In *Shut Up*, any dialectical back-and forth tips the scales in favor of language. The photographs in *Shut Up* invite only a cursory inspection, unlike the visually delectable images of ruins in Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's acclaimed photo-book, *The Ruins of Detroit*. Marchand and Meffre photographed some of the same locations that Nowak shot several years earlier: for instance, an industrial loft that was once part of Detroit's Globe Trading Company. Nowak concludes his third poetry sequence, "June 19, 1982" with a long, dark shot of the loft's scrapped-out central corridor. It is a resounding testament to emptiness, announcing that there is *nothing to see here* – neither in Nowak's photos nor the industrial landscape they record.

Figure 3.3: Nowak, Mark. "12." In "June 19, 1982." Photograph. Nowak, Mark. *Shut Up Shut Down*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004. p. 86. Accessed: 5 Oct. 2013. Scanned photograph.

A decade later, Marchand and Meffre took the same shot from an identical vantage point: in their image, missing portions of the roof leave scraps of light on the broken concrete floor. Setting aside the contingencies of camera equipment, photographic skill, and print quality that account for obvious differences between the images, these parallel shots produce distinctly different effects. While Nowak fixes on the back wall of the vacated loft – evacuating the building of any peripheral detail – Marchand and Meffre portray a vivid three- dimensional space. Attentive to the play of alternating surfaces – wood, concrete, glass, and rebar – and the multitude of shapes generated by broken windows on the right-most wall and by gridded support structures to the left, Marchand and Meffre fill the empty loft with intriguing visual textures.

Figure 3.4: Marchand, Yves and Romain Meffre. "Globe Trading Company." Photograph. In Marchand, Yves and Romain Meffre. *The Ruins of Detroit*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2010. p. 29. Accessed: 12 Dec. 2013. Scanned photograph.

Read alongside either UrbEx photos flooded with artifacts or Marchand and Meffre's spectacular portraits of decay, *Shut Up* becomes a prophylactic for the pleasures of ruins porn. Indeed, *Shut Up Shut Down* exemplifies Walter Benjamin's demand for language to anchor photos in "life."[13] John Patrick Leary echoes Benjamin's call for historical context. "Detroitism," his treatise against ruins porn, castigates the enthusiasts of decay for "requisitioning the ruin's aura of historical pathos" and, like the mute buildings they photograph, "fail[ing] to tell a complete story." Leary dismisses the "decontextualized aesthetics of ruins" for its narrative failure. As images of "historical oblivion," Leary contends that industrial ruins photography does not lead us to question the damage we face but to muse on the beauty of its traces. Or, as one blogger puts it, to engage in a privatized musing by treating industrial ruins like "a story prompt, the visual equivalent of a Mad Lib gone

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[13] "This is where inscription must come into play, which includes the photography in the literalization of the conditions of life, and without which all photographic construction must remain arrested in the proximate" ("Little History of Photography" 294).

125

melancholic, and the topic is our own lives" (Sutherland). These critics attest (and *Shut Up* reinforces) that photographs alone cannot give us the stories we need to understand social ruins. Perceiving the depth of working-class struggle obscured by the surface views of ruins photography requires deeper social and historic inquiry.

Shut Up makes clear that industrial ruins cannot speak for the working-class. Indeed, the vocal power of *Shut Up* does not "grow out of…the emptied spaces"; instead, Nowak's poetry performs a break-out. It excavates working-class histories that, in the public imaginary, abandoned buildings have displaced. When Nowak describes "Working-class kids writing their names on a wall that is bound to erase them" (20), he critiques both the vulnerability of industrial buildings ("gone," "closed," "torn down") and the way they replace working-class selves with conspicuous decay. In response to this body-for-building substitution, *Shut Up* shifts the reader's investment away from the site of industrial ruins and their reification as art objects. Rather than compelling architectural sights, industrial ruins in *Shut Up* are objective correlatives of poverty, isolation, and failure. Nowak's poems also seize and re-signify the objectness of industrial ruins. Nowak begins and ends *Shut Up Shut Down* with bricks, which figure centrally in both "$00" and "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down." By appropriating the brick as a poetic form, Nowak suggests the concrete reality of the social struggles he depicts.

Nowak responds to the Bechers' refined brick frameworks with stories of working-class ruin, answering their antiseptic "before" shots with the social aftermath cropped out of their photos. *Shut Up Shut Down* transmutes the brick from the Bechers' "anonymous sculpture" into a figure of devastation both metaphoric and concrete (Bernd Becher qtd. Lange 28). In "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down," which tracks the rising toll of unemployment in the Hoyt Lakes region of Minnesota, the brick becomes a metaphor for the brutality of corporate betrayal. In bold-faced text, Nowak quotes

a worker testifying to the shock of downsizing: "**It was like my stomach was hit with a 10-ton brick. We knew for the last few years that things weren't the best, but we never expected this**" (133). "Hoyt Lakes," a sequence nominally focusing on the closure of LTV Steel plants in Minnesota,[14] attaches this worker's account of closure to Nowak's memory of deindustrialization in his own hometown. One poem in this sequence transfigures the metaphoric brick from the previous quotation into a figure for the lost livelihoods and lost life of Nowak's old neighbors. When Bethlehem Steel closed in Buffalo, Nowak tells us in "Hoyt Lakes," "*the son (a bricklayer) of my next-door neighbor (a bricklayer) shot himself in the head*" (135).[15] Not solely metaphoric, the brick defines a father and son by their work. Another poem makes the brick an emblem of Nowaks' family shut-down story. "*The factory of my father [reduced to rubble]*" conjures the debris of Nowak's deceased father's Westinghouse plant (133). This rubble represents more than a memory for Nowak; he keeps a brick from his father's demolished Westinghouse plant on his writing desk.

After working thirty years for Westinghouse Electric, Nowak's father was laid-off when the plant shut down. "So they made him leave his job," Nowak recounted, "tore down the factory, and they gave him one brick in recompense." Nowak showed me the brick and told me that it sits on his desk whenever he writes. "I think there's a metaphorical brick," he remarked, "but then there's really this material brick ['*One brick [broke (frames)] the remains of my father's factory*' (149)]. It's not just a poetic device; it's like a two-pound thing that sits on my table. It's got my dead father's name on it" (Skype

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[14] Nowak's framing of the poems reinforces this focus. Each poem in "Hoyt Lakes" begins with the date(s) when layoffs were announced in a particular Iron Range community and closes with the number of workers there who lost their jobs.

[15] The bricklayer is a "basic laborer" in a steel mill who not only performs masonry work in plant construction and maintenance but, more essentially, repairs the brick lining of the blast furnace. Treated bricks line the interior of the furnace because they can withstand the heat of molten steel. Not explicitly mentioned in *Shut Up* is the fact that bricklaying is one of the steel-making occupations most directly and frequently exposed to asbestos and, consequently, to the threat of mesothelioma cancer. LTV Steel declared bankruptcy in 1986 and again in 2001 due in no small part to the accumulation of lawsuits related to asbestos exposure. In 2001, as part of its bankruptcy deal, LTV terminated employee health coverage and made significant cuts to employee pension plans. Nowak excoriates these dealings in the third poem of "$00" (Mesothelioma Center).

interview). This real brick encapsulates multiple meanings. It is, like the 10-ton brick evoked by the bold-faced worker's voice, an object of violence and betrayal – an ironic memento from his father's years of labor, including his service as vice-president of his union. The brick is also the debris of Westinghouse's abrupt departure, and his father's forced retirement, which necessitated his working at Radio Shak and the Valu Liquor Store until he died (23, 145). And the brick is a provocation. Instead of chucking it through a factory window, Nowak uses it to give a literal shape to his political poetry.

In "$00" Nowak extracts fragments of labor history from the books and buildings that symbolically bind it away, and "remixes" these fragments with his own memories and suggestive annotations. He forges this material into brick-shaped stanzas:

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

Figure 3.5: Nowak, Mark. "1." In "$00 / Line / Steel / Train." Text. Nowak, Mark, *Shut Up Shut Down*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004. p. 11. Accessed 10 Sept. 2014. Scanned photograph.

By forging lyrically-inflected labor history into bricks, Nowak gives a material form to his reconstructive labors. His structural arrangement transforms the brick from rubble to building material. In transposing the brick from industrial ruins to the pages of *Shut Up Shut Down*, Nowak relocates industrial history from the precarious (former) locations of labor to a medium that travels well: writing. This writing comes from Nowak; his creative labors, rendered in a symbolic brick form, position him as an index of the laborers missing from his photos. Although he injects workers' words back into circulation through his own creative labors, his poetry has become a prompt for workers to pen and perform their own labor experiences in dialogue with fellow workers), a form of artistic activism that circulates workers' creative labor across geographic space.[16] By publishing his books through the hip, left-leaning Coffee House Press, distributing his poetry to striking workers, reading it in union halls, and performing it at "poetry shares" with rank-and-file workers, Nowak has fashioned himself into a poetic "bricklayer," re-constructing labor history as a bricolage of voices that lays the groundwork for collective working-class consciousness. However, by implicitly positioning himself as a heroic (manual) laborer – by performing the constructive laborers of which his speakers have been disenfranchised – Nowak's subject position troubles this political goal of "giving birth" to the reader/worker.

Lateral Movement: Building Meaning Down the Line and Across Poetry Sequences

I want now to step back and examine the political statements that inhabit Nowak's constructive stylistics. At the level of the poetic line, *Shut Up Shut Down* manifests a resistance to

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[16] The haiku piece which concludes the haibun in the second poem of "$00" is: "Bricks, the frame [work] / of an eye, accents/ of bricklayer/ and optometrist, tongues/ extant" (12). In *Shut Up*, bricks remain the "framework of an eye," but the eye is drawn to the physicality of language – Nowak's preferred medium for expressing the nuances of living under capitalization.

129

capitalist "progress" and the demands of productivity. As Nowak testifies in *Revenants*, growing up in a manufacturing family and "listening to stories at company picnics, in church, and at the bars my father and grandfather used to frequent," he learned about the demands of production (Personal interview). The poems in "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down," *Shut Up*'s culminating poetry sequence, perform a symbolic "takeback" of production in order to make labor (history) visible. A representative line from "Hoyt Lakes" reworks the operative logic of a factory production line. It crystallizes Nowak's political project by leading readers from industrial ruins to workers: "*What broke [one brick] one miner one bricklayer what broke one worker down*" (149).

Nowak's syntax gains the forward momentum of a conveyor belt as "*What broke [one brick]*" adds "*one bricklayer*" to become "*what broke one worker down*" (149). Functioning as a rejoinder to ruins porn, with its inattention to the lived realities that ruins can only hint at, *Shut Up* leads readers, down the poetic line, from industrial ruins to working-class people. Instead of directing viewers to wonder, "What happened to this broken place?," as (images of) industrial ruins are wont to do, Nowak guides readers to question the history of social violence that industrial ruins too often over-write: "What broke one worker down?" Playing with non/identical parts, Nowak builds meaning *down the line.* This cumulative logic is also transformative, shifting the stakes from musing on structural decay to demanding what (or who) is responsible for breaking-down the worker. The result is not an integrated product – a totalizing statement that (in capitalist fashion) smooths over and obscures its own making. Instead, Nowak's poetry remains in-construction, as a series of disjointed fragments visibly welded together.

Images and questions presented at the beginning of the line remain available so the reader can trace how Nowak's message develops "down the line" – like a series of rough drafts that remain visible in the final copy. Henri Lefebvre's description of the conditions of commodity fetishism

offers a useful gloss. He explains that, if a product "bears traces of the *matériel* and time that have gone into its production," then "this makes it possible for us to reconstruct those operations." However, he confirms, "productive operations tend in the main to cover their tracks; some even have this as their prime goal: polishing, staining, facing, plastering, and so on. When construction is completed, the scaffolding is taken down; likewise, the fate of an author's rough draft is to be torn up and tossed away." Nowak's constructive stylistics write labor back into the production line by tracking the permutation of terms and concepts and marking the accumulation of new material via brackets and parentheses. This style counters the erasure of labor through capitalist production by countering the way commodities "detach themselves from productive labor. So much so, in fact, that productive labor is sometimes forgotten altogether" (Lefebvre 113). Crucially, the labor in question is Nowak's, for the labor of his speakers remains temporally bracketed in the past – before the decline of industry. Highlighting the poet's "unfinished' labor, "Hoyt Lakes" enlists the reader to actively produce meaning rather than passively consume a smooth end product.[17] By adopting this "open" style, Nowak presents his poetry, not as a masterwork, but as a work in progress – a building argument that requires the reader to carry it forward.

Nowak uses this same constructive stylistics to expresses his model of collective working-class identity: the "first person plural." As a compound phrase instead of a monolithic term such as "we," "us," or "the collective," Nowak's pluralistic naming of the "we" preserves the individual within the collective frame. The presence of "the first-person" in the phrase indicates that the collective does not overwhelm or displace the individual; instead, group identification grows out of

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[17] This transformative logic reasserts itself throughout Nowak's poetry, as when Nowak traces the arc of a work-life under capitalism: "Get work. Get (worked) over. Get up, get worked up, get working (together) again" (21). "Get work" transforms in its movement down the line, eventually culminating in an exhortation to agitate collaboratively for change.

shared individual perspectives. The first person "I" remains a crucial component of collective consciousness, just as Nowak's autobiography persists in each of his "Hoyt Lakes" re-mix poems. To explain how *Shut Up* fosters thinking in the first person plural, I circle back to the Bechers. Although Nowak's political project exceeds their study of form, my comparative reading illustrates how the Bechers' photo compositions furnished Nowak with a model for representing intersubjectivity. The Bechers' ruins vision was a point of departure for Nowak's socially committed poetry. When Nowak adapts this model to workers' words, however, it has more controversial effects.

Both *Industrial Facades* and *Shut Up Shut Down* are, fundamentally, remix projects, dependent on sampling: the Bechers – photographically – through meticulous cropping, and Nowak – textually – through selective re-quotation. By sampling in their respective media, both Nowak and the Bechers objectify their subjects – as photo, as text – to make them 'portable' for relocation to a new hermeneutic frame. Objectified, the buildings in *Industrial Facades* and the voices in *Shut Up Shut Down* become open to new meanings. As if cribbing from the Bechers, Nowak organizes his vocal objects in serial presentation: one poem per page (corresponding to *Industrial Facades*'s full-page photos of factory lofts). Within and across Nowak's "$00" poems, he adapts the Bechers' typological framework to a more explicitly social – and vocal – context. In each poem, itself a mix of quotations and lyric commentary, Nowak highlights one voice by presenting it in bold-face lettering. Visually, this typeface links speakers from disparate times, places, and working conditions. Across the "$00" sequence, it links a woman in the early 1980s threatened by closure of a New York Bethlehem steel plant, on the verge of becoming "**a ghost town**" (11); a retired Youngstown steelworker in the mid-90s explaining how the union empowered blue-collar employees to "**win respect**" in the foundry (18); and a furloughed black laborer in Pennsylvania writing to President Roosevelt in 1938 that "**I have went to see the employment manager of the mill** [and] **all he**

says their [*sic*] **is no work for colored men**" (14). By applying the same visual treatment (identical font, typeface, and formatting) to these quotations, Nowak establishes continuity through the sequence of "$00" – not unlike the typology of factory silhouettes that the Bechers created through consistent photographic conditions and sequential framing of factories from different countries and decades.[18]

By instantiating a pattern, Nowak's typographic flow suggests a shared working-class position, a trans-historical *type* of struggle brought forth in workers' distinct local stories. What does it mean, however, to think of quotations as "working-class," naming not only a version of struggle, but a type of person? Similar to the Bechers' signature "types" – not one exemplary building but many buildings strategically collated to visualize their common form – Nowak links (fragments of) stories from diverse working lives. The working-class subjectivity he thereby evokes is irreducible to any one of its constituent expressions. It simultaneously privileges the local and collective, much as the typological work performed by the Bechers "grants special visibility to the relations of resemblance *and* difference among its various instances" (Fried 321, emphasis mine). Translating the Bechers' comparative framing from photography to typography, Nowak develops a mechanism for "engaging between scales – from the local to the global" which, he testifies, is "an absolutely necessary mode of response during this era of globalization" (qtd. Clinton). His montage of bold working-class voices plays out across the lateral page-turning of the reader. This montage offers a blueprint for thinking in "the first person plural." It enables Nowak to transmit stories that are

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[18] The "types" of experience that Nowak characterizes via different typefaces vary depending on the poem-sequence. For instance, in "$00," Nowak uses only two typefaces: standard and bold. In standard notation, Nowak includes verbatim statements (sans quotation marks) from Walter Benjamin and Karl Marx, along with Nowak's covertly autobiographical reminiscences and fragmented haikus whose broken syntax relays the ruinous effects of deindustrialization. Offset by workers' words rendered in bold, these other statements take on the role of annotating the bold focal text. By contrast, in "Hoyt Lakes," Nowak presents his lyrical reflections in italics, with standard type-face marking quotations of various local news media: *Duluth News-Tribune* or *Mesabi Daily News* reports on the closure of LTV Steel in the Minnesota Iron Range region. Again, however, workers' have the visual priority of bold language.

"unique yet too painfully in common," in his efforts to foster a more inclusive and robust working-class consciousness – one which cross-cuts time, place, and working conditions (Nowak qtd. Wagstaff 464). Nowak always uses bold type-face to depict a working-class perspective, and this consistency in formatting bolsters the ranks of working-class voices across Nowak's poetry books, thereby expanding the reach of "the first person plural." Nevertheless, Nowak's rendering of people-as-quotations reifies complex selves into vocal objects. When Nowak injects these already-reified identities back into circulation as "types," he surrogates the complexity of the local – the contingencies of race, class, gender, and environment – into marks of difference (literally – typographic marks). Individual voices become instances of black labor, of female labor, etc., which feels more egregiously reductive than the Bechers' objectifications of industry. I will explore this tension more conclusively after examining how these "types" interact in particular poems.

Having discussed how Nowak's poetry proceeds laterally – down the line and across his poetry sequences – in the next section, I will address the dynamics of individual poems. I use "montage" to characterize the serial framing of poems in a sequence. Through consistent framing, Nowak collectivizes quotations and, metonymically, collectivizes their speakers across the reader's page-turning. As a collectivizing device, the montage bolsters a sense of working-class solidarity as each page adds a new voice to diversify the "type." Individually, however, each poem re-mixes various "types" within one frame. The resulting textual collages operate visually, conveying a portrait of fracture. As different typefaces clash and intersect, so do the disparate "types" they represent. Thus, while the montage links disparate voices diachronically through their common framing, the collage is a site of confrontation. Each poem injects different types into a single frame, contracting distinct eras, places, and selves into a synchronic vision of "labor history." Amidst the obvious and expected disparities between Nowak's "types," disturbing continuities emerge.

134

Nowak most often cites early hip hop and industrial music as the origin of his polyvocal poetics, explaining that "Afrika Bambaata and Jam Master Jay taught me to sample long before Ezra Pound did" (qtd. Hugill). In this self-presentation, Nowak becomes a hip new kind of literary re-mixer, a bibliographic DJ cross-cutting quotations by using an Excel spreadsheet as a synthesizer. Nowak's re-mix narrative keeps him "relevant" – not merely a derivative or descendent of old-school literary radicals. Yet, despite his emphasis on sound-mixing, visual language adds a crucial dimension to Nowak's poetry. By em**bold**ening workers' words across poems, Nowak establishes the intersubjectivity of diverse local voices. Complementing this diachronic move, each poem in "$00 / Line / Steel / Train" has the synchronic impact of a pictorial collage. The clash of bold and standard type-faces packs a disjointed portrait of working-class struggle into each "brick":

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The interruption of the closure, in this instance, by the frame: "LTV [Steel] was able to use its bankruptcy to reduce payments to productive workers." **In the old days when the city bus used to pull up to the factory gate, the driver would call out "butcher shop" or "slaughterhouse."** "In negotiations with the steelworkers union, LTV extracted more takebacks than other, presumably healthier steel companies were able to." **I can remember sitting around the lunch table and everybody at that table, there must have been seven or eight people, had a finger or something missing.** "This gave LTV an advantage over its competitors." **Believe it or not, people felt it was kind of like a badge of honor that they had a finger or something missing, and that would be a topic of conversation.** "Bankruptcy became, through a cultural process that understood bankruptcy as failure, a condition for success."
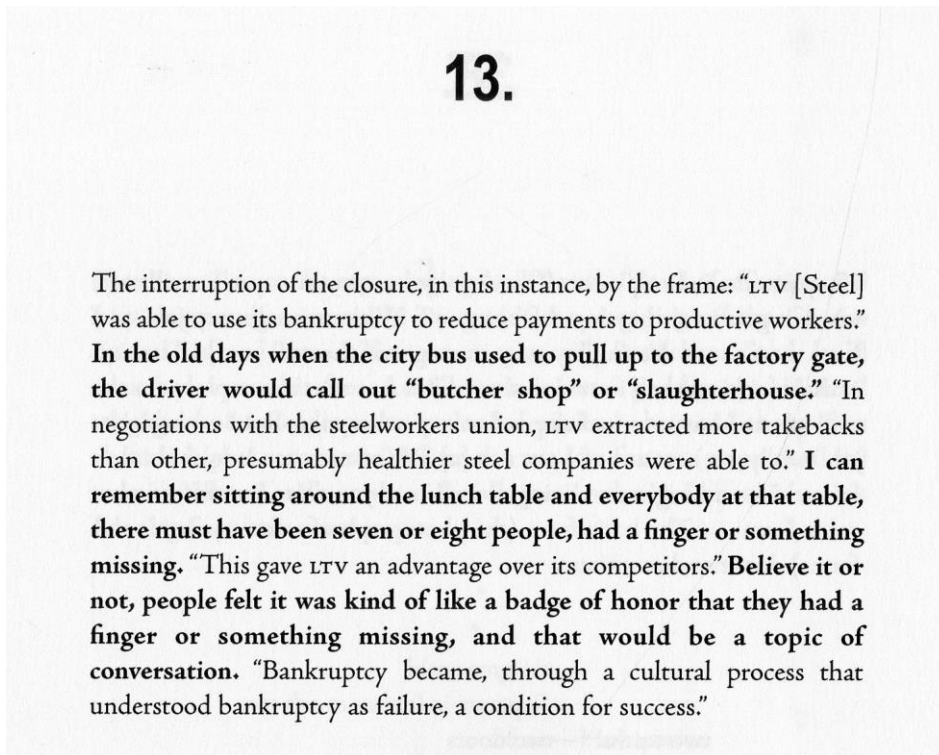
Figure 3.6: Nowak, Mark. "13." In "$00 / Line / Steel / Train." Text. Nowak, Mark, *Shut Up Shut Down*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004. p. 17. Accessed 10 Sept. 2014. Scanned photograph.

One critic interprets this visual disjuncture as a metaphor for the conflict of interests surrounding factory closure. He describes *Shut Up* as a "juxtaposition of *counter*-narratives…the *conflicting* narratives of historians, theoreticians, and urban planners *set against* a chorus of voices of those dislocated and impoverished by postindustrial urban life" (Pohl, emphasis mine). Indeed, as textual breaks draw our gaze, they heighten awareness of narrative ruptures. More subtle, however, are moments where these "counter-narratives" coalesce. Discrepancy is a hallmark of collage, but the coherence that emerges across disparate sources is its revelatory power, yielding "an original totality manifesting ruptures of diverse sorts" (Group Mu 13-14). Interpreting Nowak's "labor history with line breaks" as a collage – a totality with ruptures – alerts readers to continuities that subsume these clear and present breaks. The most obvious "break" that Nowak deals with is historic: the post/industrial break dividing an epoch of labor from a new epoch of decline. To explore how he approaches this break, I turn to the poem excerpted above, as it explicitly addresses the importance of rupture through the notion of interruption. It is also one of the many poems in *Shut Up* that reaches back to a period of industrial productivity. Since critics have neglected how *Shut Up* incorporates this prior history into its incrimination of industrial abandonment, the way this poem formally navigates the confrontation between "industrial" and "postindustrial" history proves particularly revelatory.

Formally speaking, the most decisive line breaks in "$00" occur not at the stanza's edge but between narrative lines – where one quotation visibly ruptures the continuity of another. In the above excerpt, Nowak intrudes into a news report that "LTV [Steel] was able to use its bankruptcy to reduce payments to productive workers" (13). Before resuming the LTV shut-down coverage, he interjects a disparate line of thought invoking a past era of productivity. "**In the old days**," recalls an anonymous steel worker, "**when the city bus used to pull up to the factory gate, the driver would call out 'butcher shop' or 'slaughterhouse.'**" Because Nowak visually distinguishes the

worker's voice from the news report, the reader can track where one vocal block disrupts the narrative closure of the other, undermining its textual – and ideological – integrity. The poem cuts back and forth between the official story on LTV's profit-building schemes (on a post-industrial timeline) and the firsthand account of workers bonding over labor that maimed them (which returns the reader to an era of work). While Nowak explicitly intervenes in this poem only once, he delivers a précis at two levels. Opening the poem with "The interruption of the closure, in this instance by the frame," he simultaneously summarizes LTV's bankruptcy plot (by which the company defaulted on its pension programs in a strategic "interruption" of closure protocol) and reveals his own version of this tactic as a poetic strategy for critique.

This tactic of enjambment involves two key components: apparent closure and an "interruption of the closure," which reveals a startling continuity. The through-lines it creates may prove especially startling to readers who approach *Shut Up* through its reviews, since these tend to emphasize a lament for lost work collectives.[19] Critically neglected, however, are the disturbing continuities that link Nowak's subjects across "the post/industrial divide." Nowak's critique bridges the break that, rhetorically and politically, separates industrial productivity and decline. The critical throughline implicates the corporate elite *and* industrial male culture in the ruptures that afflict the working class. Such continuities reveal how "$00" resists nostalgia for industrial labor, including past forms of working-class collectivity. This subversive interpretation critically re-frames Nowak's opening poetry sequence – and the targets of his complex critiques.

By interposing texts culled from opposite ends of the productivity spectrum, Nowak differentiates these textual fragments as substantially different – in tone, time, and typeface – making

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[19] See, for instance, poet-activist Philip Metres's "Poetry as a Medium to Making." In this blog post, Metres declares that "Nowak's work not only elegizes the loss of industrial unionism in America, but also increasingly concerns itself with transnational unionism."

their disjuncture easy to perceive in the visual surface of his poem. Yet, through the logic of collage, a consistent story – or "a new whole" – emerges across the immediate disruptions (Group Mu 5). On the surface, the LTV news story has no parley with the worker's rumination on the hazards of steel-making. However, when Nowak enjambs corporate "takebacks" with workers' missing fingers, he traces a shocking through-line of working-class ruin across these disparate texts and timelines.[20] In its original news context, "takebacks," which LTV "exacted" through "negotiations with the steelworkers union," invokes the playground parlance of *no takebacks*. Yet, forced to confront the worker's memory of "**sitting around the lunch table**" and discovering that "**seven or eight people […] had a finger or something missing**," LTV's "takebacks" get re-framed as another dismemberment; by defaulting on pension payments, the company severs workers from a secure future. The poem's vectors of reading move back and forth in time, as the news report on closure, in turn, re-inflects the worker's narrative of industrial labor. From the vantage of LTV's exploitative maneuverings, the workers' dismembered hands become one more site of corporate "takebacks": fingers seized through unsafe labor conditions.

In "Shutterings, Endings, and Autopsies" (2009), Paula Rabinowitz limns a new field of study by investigating "a poetics of the postindustrial documentary." She too recognizes a historical continuity in *Shut Up*, but links the book to Depression-era images of workers and the Dust Bowl. Linking these histories of decline, Rabinowitz concludes that "closure and abandonment is a form of violence meriting its own rhetoric." She thereby reinstates the framework of a break, making the violence of industrial labor and the violence of closure categorically different. If these versions of

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[20] My reference to "timelines" might recall the temporal logic of filmic montages, but I'd like to signal instead how Nowak uses the collage to disrupt the forward march of time. By reifying different eras into quotations, Nowak removes them from temporal trajectories based on progress (i.e., rupture and innovation). He divorces these quotations from a before-after narrative of decline by rearranging them spatially within the single frame of a collage poem. Co-existing in one space – the same page – these quotations can invoke two different timelines (progress and decline) without submitting to their narrative logic.

working-class violence are so distinct, then working people and the unemployed lose a common ground for resistance. What's more, loss becomes the operating narrative, which creates an opening for problematic nostalgia.

Shut Up discards this framework by tracing a disturbing through-line of violence from the halcyon days of unionized labor through the plant-closing crisis. As enjambment propels the reader across the syntactic break between quotations, Nowak draws out a deep critique of corporate exploitation that trends further back in history than the violent breaks wrought by closure and abandonment. Oscillating between a timeframe of prosperity and one of decline, his poem protests that steel companies were extracting brutal "takebacks" long before shut-down. Contrary to Rabinowitz's reading, Nowak does not treat the collapse of industry as a form of violence unto itself. Instead, he demonstrates that the deep violence of deindustrialization materializes when collapse is rhetorically conjoined with the violence of industrial labor. Indeed, the two histories enjambed in his poem represent complementary, rather than "counter-," narratives." This relation elicits an intense sense of injustice, as the corporate exploitations on either side of the post/industrial divide are brought into sharper relief through enjambment.

Despite critics' focus on the consequences of lost work, this poem demonstrates that the struggles intoned *in Shut Up* were not born in the post-industrial era; they are congenital to industrial capitalism. Through their strategic recombination of quotations, many of the poems in "$00" disrupt the ideological closure that divides the history of industrial productivity from the discourse on deindustrialization. By drawing readers across the break imposed by factory closure, Nowak forecloses on industrial nostalgia implicit in the worker's reflection. Recognizing this move requires reading across "the break(s)." Such reading re-frames the dynamics of industrial labor from the vantage of factory closure and its conspicuous ruins. In "$00," this retrospective view undercuts

139

nostalgia for steelwork by revealing industrial labor itself as a force of ruin: it dismembers workers'

bodies. Continuing to cross-cut timelines, Nowak re-frames factory shut-down as an extension of

this ruinous industrial labor. From the vantage of the past, lost pensions evolve into ruined futures.

By interposing these incongruous histories, Nowak's poetic collage re-casts them as two sides of the

same story. This story recounts a history of corporate exploitation endemic to industrial capitalism.

While Nowak's poetry bears witness to the ravages of industrial closure, as critics attest, its

enjambment of productivity with shut-down dramatizes the persistence of capitalist power

dynamics. Deindustrialization imposes devastating ruptures – in the lives of workers, in the

economy, in the landscape – that register "the shock of plant closing discontinuity" (Rogovin and

Frisch 14). Like the collage form, however, capitalism emerges in *Shut Up* as a totality that subsumes

the ruptures it creates.

Acknowledging these ruptures, dismemberments, and breaks as the *systemic* violence of

industrialism undercuts nostalgic visions of "**the old days**." Critics tend to read the lack of photos

"$00" "echo[ed]" in "Nowak's poems about the disappearance of the steel industry," yet this critical

emphasis on absence and loss obscures Nowak's deeper condemnation of industrial capitalism

(Rabinowitz, "Between the Outhouse and the Garbage Dump" 46). Rather than "mirroring formally

the emptiness of unemployment" (Hugill), the missing ruins in "$00" belie the persistence of

corporate power dynamics *even* in the absence of factories or work. The lack of photos in "$00"

leads the reader to question what becomes visible when the sight of prodigious postindustrial ruins

is withheld. Re-directing the "ruin gaze" to textual fragments, Nowak furnishes ruined bodies and

ruined futures.[21] These social ruins expose the sustained violence of the steel industry, which profits

by sacrificing workers' limbs and livelihoods. To regard factory closure as an end-stop elides the

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[21] On the history of ruin gazing, see Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle's introduction to *The Ruins of Modernity* (2010).

persistence of corporate violence across the post/industrial break. Even Nowak's claim that "*Shut Up* was about the collapse of industry" unduly constricts the scope of his critique (Skype interview). Through its double vision of productivity and decline, Nowak's enjambed labor history indicts capitalism for exploiting working-class people, before and beyond industrial collapse. As this poem tacitly protests, the working class was always already *in ruins* under industrial capitalism.

Nowak suggests that capitalism will continue to ruin the working class unless workers rally together through new forms – and at larger scales – of solidarity and resistance. Past models of industrial collectivity are, *Shut Up* attests, dangerously inadequate. While this poem indicts corporate capitalism, Nowak also critiques a masculine industrial culture hegemonically consenting to its own exploitation. Despite the myriad anecdotes about men's work communities that Nowak intersperses throughout "$00," scholars have skirted his profound ambivalence about white male solidarity as the touchstone of industrial collectivity. [22] Yet this ambivalence forms a crucial layer of *Shut Up*'s industrial critique. Further, it compels a radically inclusive new activism on behalf of the working class.

Through the apparatus of collage, where "juxtaposition replaces exposition" (Perloff 386), Nowak avoids strident accusations, instead leaving the reader to explore the interplay of fragments within the "new whole" he has assembled. Interrupting the reporter's statement that take-backs secured through bankruptcy "gave LTV an advantage over its competition," the worker's

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[22] These include the following fragments of oral history packed into the "bricks" of "$00": "**Built sheds and piss houses. We took care of shit**… a flag out of focus where working-class (white) masculinity also factors into how factories get framed. **You made steel together and you won your dignity together**" (12); "**If you were in a pub you talked shop. How you would do things differently if you ran the place**…There **were a lot of smart guys in production but the company would never let you put your ideas into effect**" (19); "**The bowling league at Holiday Bowl started at 11:00 pm and we bowled after working night turn**… Working-class (white) masculinity. **Just the guys from the mills**" (32); "**When we were kids we though the steel mill was it**… **We'd seen the men comin' out, all dirty, black. The only thing white was the goggles over their eyes.** '[S]till more important is the idea that the pleasures of whiteness could function as a "wage" for white workers.' **We thought they were it, strong men.** (The missing word is white)… **It wasn't what it was cut out to be**" (26).

141

"response" to this news shockingly accommodates LTV's acquisitive ploys. Explaining that "**people felt it was kind of like a badge of honor that they had a finger or something missing, and that would be a topic of conversation,**" the worker consents to a double dismemberment – of bodies and pensions – as the poem compounds the violence this steelworker faces. Instead of breaking this cycle of violence – e.g. rupturing this system through some type of resistance – the steelworker's response flows seamlessly with the *modus operandi* of a ruthless industry. Missing fingers are symbolic of missing accusations: Who, Nowak demands, is pointing the finger at the corporation? Symbolically castrated, working-class men reclaim their masculinity in the following poem.

A Poetics of Dismemberment

Nowak critiques industrial masculinity more forcefully when he addresses the gendered politics of belonging to working-class communities. These comprise the collectives formed on the shop floor and the communities that persist in the social spaces abandoned by industry. Though critics of *Shut Up* sidestep its indictment of violence committed by workers – focusing instead on capitalist oppression – "$00" also implicates working-class men as aggressors, rather than passive purveyors, of social fracture. As the following poem enjambs two belligerent expressions of "working-class (white) masculinity," Nowak straddles the generational divide imposed by factory closure to expose a violent, sexist legacy of industrial male membership.

Nowak transcribes the following graffiti tags from a building "a block from my house." By re-locating the graffiti from its conspicuously post-industrial setting, Nowak primes these words for reinscription in his trans-historical collage.

124.

"PUSSY CRUSHER" in gray spray paint—

"WEED   PENIS   MEMBERS   BEER" (and)
"CT FUCKED EB ——> HERE"

Vocabulary is the problem—men have vulgar mouths. The "CLASS OF 2001" is responsible for these words; the owners of the trains that pass them (a block from my house, rarely on schedule) will never ride this line. **Sometimes nude pictures are all over the wall.** (These are seldom in frames.) **They don't like women working, they try to embarrass you. Men** (not available for this photograph) **don't want to acknowledge a woman's place is not just in the home.**

Figure 3.7: Nowak, Mark. "124." In "$00 / Line / Steel / Train." Text. Nowak, Mark. *Shut Up Shut Down*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004. p. 18. Accessed 10 Sept. 2014. Scanned photograph.

Adding that "'THE CLASS OF 2001' is responsible for these words," Nowak signals a generational divide separating these crude writers from the working woman quoted below them in bold. Growing up after Buffalo's heavy industry had largely shut down, the youth generation has little in common with this "woman of steel." Explaining shop floor culture, she confirms that "**Vocabulary is the problem—men have vulgar** mouths…nude **pictures are all over the wall**…They **do not like women working, they try to embarrass you. Men** (not available for this photograph) **don't want to acknowledge a woman's place is not just in the home**" (18). Nowak's quoted workers typically testify to the violence of foremen, absentee factory owners, or government officials. Yet this poem portrays intimidation and exclusion as hallmarks of working-class cultures. Nowak depicts fellow workers divided against each other by an exclusionary, "members only" logic. Unlike corporate "takebacks," the misogyny that alienates female steel workers reflects an internalized

143

dismemberment: a male "member[ship]" which defines itself by deliberately excluding female colleagues. No elegy for the loss of industrial unionism, this poem presents an industrial community that was never inclusive enough – instead, riven by a solidarity that excludes. This community has internalized a division of labor that serves the managerial elite,[23] and Nowak demonstrates how this misogynist male exceptionalism, scripted in graffiti, persists into the next generation, even in the absence of work.

What sort of correspondences does Nowak draw between the (presumably) male youth culture that stakes its territory in the former space of manual labor – perhaps the same place these young men would have worked if the factories were still productive – and the shop floor chauvinistically divided down gender lines? Nowak's enjambments suggest that an exclusionary gender logic has become so ingrained in working-class culture that it crosses the post/industrial divide in traces of shop-floor machismo scrawled on an abandoned building. Even if the "intergenerational chain of work" has been broken, a residual industrial male culture persists (Portelli 57).[24] If the obscene tags are a sign of post-industrial cultural decay (a type of verbal ruins porn) they are also – or *instead*, Nowak suggests – a legacy of industrialism. As a statement of identity *learned* by "THE CLASS OF 2001," the vulgar tag on the factory façade echoes the pornography inside the machine shop. As if countering the pornographic imagining of the maimed male body in the previous poem, these factory workers become the purveyors of pornographic imagery that instead exposes women. Enjambed with the steelworker's story of sexual harassment, "PENIS   MEMBERS   BEER" becomes a curt synopsis of men's after-work culture – a

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[23] Describing the power structures behind industrial production, economic geographers Michael Storper and Richard Walker explain that, "Internally, management relies on segmenting the labor force through piecework standards, often utilizing racial and sexual divisions as well" (36-7).

[24] See also Anoop Nayak, "Displaced Masculinities: Chavs, Youth and Class in the Post-Industrial City" (2006), particularly page 826.

synecdoche for the "members only" clubs, bars, and taverns that surrounded mills and factories, defining the industrial landscape even as they fragmented the working-class community into clubs and factions.[25]

Rather than deindustrialization-as-loss, this poem dramatizes the persistence of capitalist structures and gender dynamics into the purportedly *post*-industrial era. Nowak told me that "*Shut Up Shut Down* was about the collapse of industry" (Skype interview). In "$00," he explained, "I was trying to capture that fracturing, that collapse, that disintegration of industry and community and self that I had been a witness to in Buffalo and Toledo and Detroit and the Iron Range, i.e., the 'rust belt'" (qtd. *12th Street*). My analysis breaks this post-industrial frame by illuminating how "fracturing," "collapse," and "disintegration" also aptly summarize the dynamics of industrial labor, as selves were bodily fractured by hazardous working conditions. And community was dis-integrated: divided by gender and, as "June 19, 1982" deplores, by race as well. Unfortunately, hyper-visible factory ruins have overshadowed these personal and social fractures, entrenched as they are in capitalist industrial culture. Whereas most critics locate the basis of Nowak's critique in lost work and the resulting breakdown of industrial community, "$00" frames deindustrialization as a continuation of corporate power and industrial ruin for working-class communities. In *Shut Up*, as Nowak crosses back and forth across the post/industrial break, the collapse of industry leads back to the fracturing forces of industrial culture itself. But most of Nowak's critics have not *read across the break*. Interpreting factory closure as an unambiguous break with the past reflects a false consciousness by which these scholars perpetuate the nostalgia that *Shut Up* rejects.

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[25] See Hoerr, *And the Wolf Finally Came: The Decline of the American Steel Industry*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1988. p 173.

"…the (goddamn) frame is used
is used is utterly used against us and by us and upon us and for us is used is used
in the present (past) future (form) we are used yet users yet used"

- "$00 / Line / Steel / Train" (28)

"Smashed Glass Class"

Nowak begins "June 19, 1982," the centerpiece of *Shut Up Shut Down*, with a portrait of

fracture. The first photograph in the book is a tightly-framed shot that reveals little: a window

composed of broken panes affording no in-sight into the shuttered Detroit factory it frames. Only

visible through this fractured viewpoint is some vaguely industrial debris, no telling artifacts. Bereft

of the visual cues on which UrbExers depend, what can we infer from this narrow vantage? Shut out

of the building, the reader seeks a greater depth of field in Nowak's poetry. While his photo

contracts our visual field, the "haikus" that conclude each haibun poem in "June 19, 1982" strike

with break-beat intensity on a wide field of indictable institutions, events, and conditions in

American history.
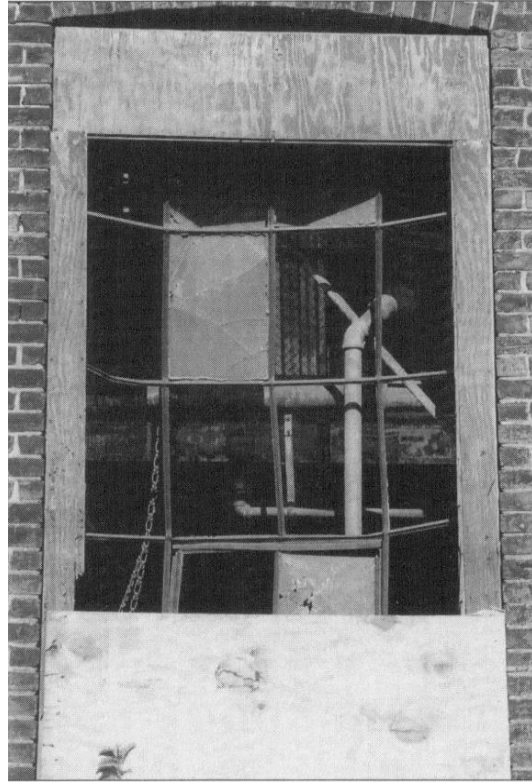
Figure 3.8: Nowak, Mark. "1." In "June 19, 1982." Photograph. Nowak, Mark. *Shut Up Shut Down*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004. p. 64. Accessed: 5 Oct. 2013. Scanned photograph.

Invoking "plantations," "Angel Island," and the "space Race," these poems range widely in their critique of subjugations, exclusions, and rivalries perpetrated by the United States (67, 71). "June 19, 1982" injects industrial ruins into this continuing history of nationally sponsored hostility and aggression whose myriad forms of violence severely contract the working-class community. A cohort of capitalized institutions – including U.S. corporations, government, and, Nowak adds, industrial unions – have fractured the working class along the fault lines of race, gender, and (assumptions of) nationality, as if an entire class of people could be narrowed down to white American men. Such a restrictive vision of community reflects a poverty of imagination in defining

147

the "we" – a poverty that, *Shut Up* suggests, debilitates the working class worldwide. "June 19, 1982"

implicates masculine industrial culture in this "false" communalism.[26]

Despite its privileged position as the central sequence in *Shut Up* – and the first to incorporate

ruins photographs – "June 19, 1982" has garnered few close-readings from reviewers and critics of

Shut Up. This reticence likely owes to the brutal murder case referred to by the poem's title. On this

date in Detroit, Chrysler superintendent Ronald Ebens fatally bludgeoned fellow auto-worker

Vincent Chin following a drunken altercation at a strip club. At the height of the auto crisis, as

thousands of GM, Ford, and Chrysler employees faced layoffs, anti-Japanese hostility mounted, with

Ebens allegedly fulminating at Chin, "It's because of you little motherfuckers that we're out of

work" (qtd. Choy and Tajima). Yet Chin was not in fact Japanese, but a Chinese-American

automotive draftsman for Chrysler. Intensifying tragedy with irony, the American nationalist fervor

excited by industrial decline led one autoworker to murder another. This labor-related hate crime

disrupts the ennobling vision of unions in *Shut Up*'s two verse plays. Positioned between plays that

valorize industrial unionism, "June 19, 1982" inspires a powerful ambivalence, leading me to

question: When does the plural "I" betoken false consciousness, and when does it arouse working-

class collectivity?

To reprise a line from "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down," "w*hat broke one worker down*" on June 19, 1982

was, in the most literal sense, a fellow worker (149). Implicating workers in the murderous brutality

of labor relations undermines the prevailing critical read on Nowak's working-class sympathies.[27] As

a working-class sympathizer and activist, what does Nowak achieve by dredging up this savage act of

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[26] Conversations with Tung-Hui Hu helped me clarify this argument.

[27] Steel Wagstaff, for example, declares that "Nowak's poetry is as intense, compassionate, committed, and deeply earnest as the human beings whose stories and voices he documents" (454). Reviewing *Shut Up* for the *Whistling Shade* literary journal, Pixie Youngdahl describes Nowak's subjects as "the workers who are mourned and celebrated."

violence, when he could have looked to the McLouth steelworkers' march on Washington just two months earlier? Poetry scholar Margaret Ronda reconciles Nowak's harsh portrayal by blaming unemployment. She argues that, by highlighting an extreme case of violence, Nowak "challenges his readers to confront the ugliest psychic effects of unproductivity." I argue instead that, even more forcefully than "$00," "June 19, 1982" condemns the racist underpinnings of industrial work culture and challenges us to embrace globally inclusive forms of solidarity.

Each poem in the sequence triangulates Nowak's response to the Chin case through three distinct "voices" clearly demarcated by typeface. The first two present contradictory portraits of unemployment. Beginning with an italicized academic perspective – via excerpts from Raymond Williams's cultural etymology of "unemployment" – the reader makes a jarring transition to the bold-faced worker's view. From the scholarly distance of Williams's investigation into the "*moral implications*" and "*ideological intentions*" behind the evolving concept of "unemployment," the blunt misery intoned below delivers a reality check (87). In what appears to be the voice of a laid-off worker, the bold text recounts the physical and emotional tolls of long-term unemployment: "**I dislike having people about me. […] I avoid people when it is possible. I prefer to be alone most of the time**" (75). These testaments to the painful realities of redundancy expose the rarified nature of Williams's cultural critique, yet they fail to inspire outrage or sympathy. This bold "testimony" works differently than the bold workers' words in *Shut Up*'s other photo-texts. Instead of quoting working-class speakers, Nowak transcribes True or False statements from a questionnaire issued to laid-off workers from Youngstown Sheet & Tube. The resulting "voice" offers a dark parody of the first person singular – an anaphora of "I"s that, unlike the other bold voices, fails to rouse a working-class consciousness. Rather than reverberating across the sequence in a chorus of communal struggle, this stutter of singular miseries circles back on itself, generating an insular momentum that shuts-out other voices. Here Nowak uses the dry language and inflexible syntax of

149

the Youngstown survey to convey a "false" communalism – not an intersubjectivity built across varied voices but a set of homogenous "I"s masquerading in bold type. This one-dimensional portrait of the laid-off worker augurs the danger of trading multiplicity for a monolithic working-class subject. In the narrow column that concludes each poem (Figure 3.9), Nowak addresses the narrowing of the "we" with a belligerent, percussive beat.

4.

The developing sense is important, because it represents the specialization of productive effort to paid employment by another, which (cf. WORK, job, LABOUR) has been an important part of the history of capitalist production and wage-labour. In several related words this development can be traced.

I am having to take medication to calm my nerves. I find that I must take drugs in order to feel good. I am unable to sleep unless I take sleeping pills or powders. My friends often supply me with drugs that make me feel better.

*

smashed glass class
exhortation

"This land is my land"
or Angel Island

smashed glass class
assimilation

No Applications
Being Accepted Today

Japanese cars
scrapes in a bar

smashed glass class
after factories deportation

like Chrysler was drowning
like closing Lynch Road

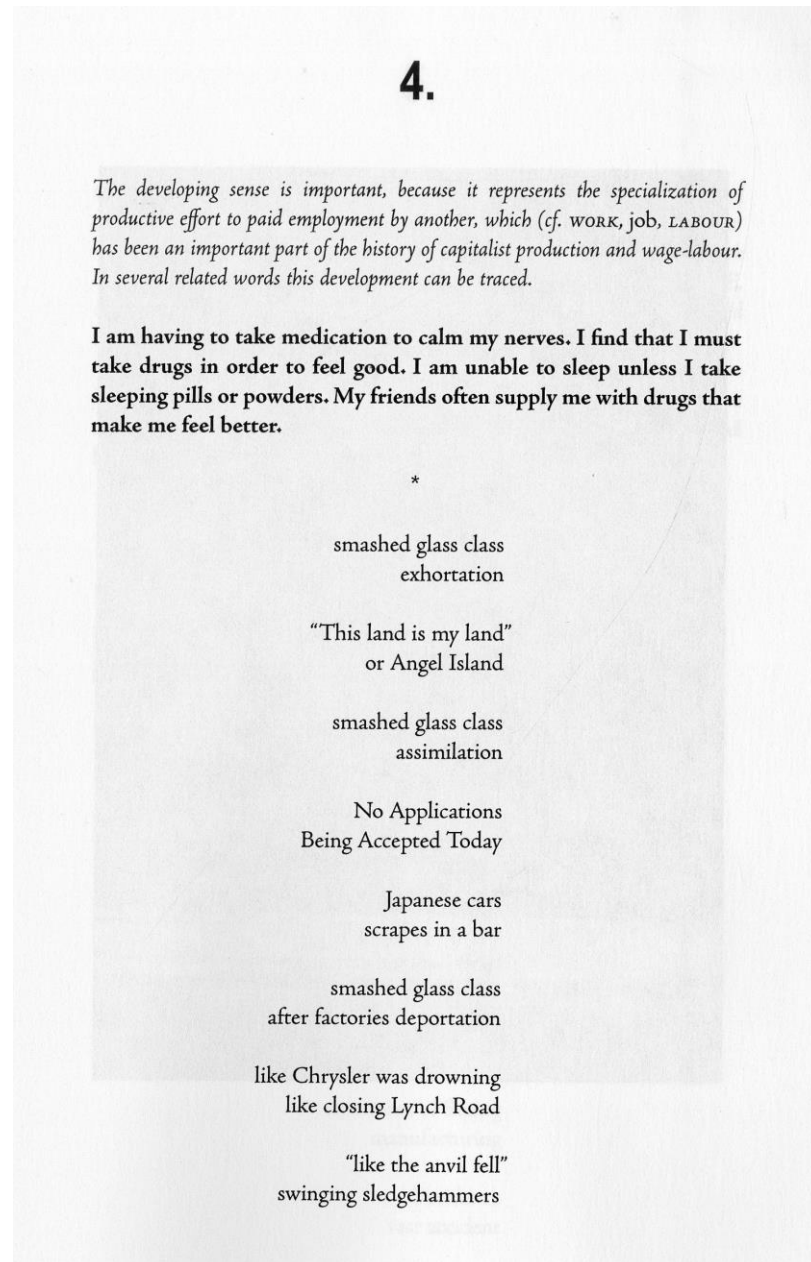"like the anvil fell"
swinging sledgehammers

Figure 3.9: Nowak, Mark. "4." In "June 19, 1982." Text. Nowak, Mark. *Shut Up Shut Down*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004. p. 71. Accessed: 10 Sept. 2014. Scanned photograph.

These hard-hitting couplets reiterate the destructive rhythms of Vincent Chin's beating. More gripping than either Williams's ideological inquiry or the survey's tiresome complaints, these poems address the controversial violence of June 19, 1982 in a parade of fractured pieces. With no discernible narrative throughline, Nowak pounds out "'never was a racist' / just swung sledgehammers // Japanese cars / barroom brawls // scrawled abandonment / rented U-Hauls" (83). Seemingly offering more line-breaks than coherent labor history, these poems charge the reader to reconstruct "what happened" from a barrage of fragments and suggestive rhymes. Without a clear explication of events or their implications, Nowak's account of Chin's murder emerges through seemingly random or creatively rhythmic juxtapositions. This play of fragments recalls Matthew Christopher's UrbEx photo-texts, which invite the reader to "chart your own way and draw your own conclusions from the debris I have scattered" ("about"). Much like Matthew Christopher, Nowak strategically "scatters" his textual fragments. After realizing that these fragments are the "debris" of a documentary film, I charted a path back to Nowak's sources. By tracing that path in the following section, I uncover critically neglected connections in this strategically situated debris.

Nowak offers a key to his engagement with the Vincent Chin case. Readers willing to labor through the materials in his Works Cited will discover that he builds each poetic column in "June 19, 1982" from quotations and ekphrastic references to the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*. Unmoored from their original context, these filmic allusions are absorbed – sans quotation marks – into the powerful rhythm of Nowak's poems. "I watched the Vincent Chin film maybe a dozen times," he noted, "to pick out every tiny piece of language that I thought was useful from it" (Skype interview). By seamlessly assimilating this found language into his poetic response, Nowak conceals his reappropriations. To clarify some of these nuances, I analyze "June 19, 1982" through its engagement with Christine Choy and Renee Tajima's film. Unpacking the invisible interpretive labor

151

that links "Japanese cars / scrapes in a bar // smashed glass class / after factories deportation" (71) deepens *Shut Up*'s conflicted vision of (white masculine) industrial culture.

This sequence intensifies the concerns I drew out of "$00," as Nowak appropriates a brutal case of intra-class conflict to expose "the problem of what we did… a critique of the national" (Skype interview). Ironically, as he focuses on one specific day, what might otherwise seem an exceptional case becomes a touchstone for understanding the brutal consequences of economic nationalism and the violently divisive attitudes characterizing "we" in the United States. Within a broader critique of the nation's communal imaginary – which constructs American identity through military/market competition and consumerism – Nowak implicates industrial workers as "used yet users yet used" in the capitalist struggle for profit and power (28). "June 19, 1982" renders this tragic conflict of interests with a bracing beat, echoing the physical violence of deindustrialization.

Because most critics cite the loss of work as the basis of Nowak's critiques, they evade his conflicted attitude towards past forms of worker solidarity, including industrial unionism. However, Nowak implicates the working class in "what we did wrong as a nation," as he infuses "June 19, 1982" with an anti-nostalgic force. In "Not Much Left: Wageless Life in Millennial Poetry," Margaret Ronda deftly reads this sequence as a poetic reckoning with worklessnesss. However, her focus on the "break" from labor – "the absence of the coherent identity that work offers" – leaves untouched the poem's bracing critique of this "coherent" but monolithic identity of *the* white male worker. While Ronda focuses on loss, absence, and negations imposed by factory closure, I highlight presence and persistence: not the losses but the legacies of industrial "solidarity" in the ruins of the working class.

Fixating on absence, Ronda interprets the syntactic breaks and intervening white space in "$00 / Line / Steel / Train" as evidence of a "collective vanishing point." Bereft of "the coherent

152

identity that work offers," the wageless multitudes are not only silenced, she insists, but rendered "socially invisible," as "their effacement enters the public imaginary only through its symptomatic anti-social acts." According to Ronda, then, "June 19, 1982" indicts both the "neoliberal economic policies" that deprive workers of their defining identity by depriving them of work *and* the (poetry reading) public that fails to recognize this violent dispossession.[28] If I examine "June 19, 1982" through Ronda's aperture, Nowak's refrain of "smashed glass class" resonates with the public (in)visibility of the out-of-work poor, replaced by smash-windowed factories. By reading this poem as decidedly *post-*, a critique of the post/industrial break, Ronda makes the "smashed glass class" a consequence of lost work – resulting, that is, "after factories deportation" (the timeframe captured in Nowak's Detroit photos) (71).[29] What about *before*? Tracing Nowak's rhymes across the "break," I contend that the debris of *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* points to a deeper context of interpretation. Twice, "June 19, 1982" links sledgehammers, Japanese cars, and bar fights – connections that parallel a strategic juxtaposition of scenes in *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*

Readers unfamiliar with the film (or with the anti-Japanese hostility pervading Detroit in 1982) are unlikely to bridge the breaks dividing "'never was a racist' / just swung sledgehammers" from "Japanese cars / barroom brawls" (83). Yet when read as allusions to the film, these lines invoke film clips of autoworkers smashing Japanese cars with sledgehammers. In a pivotal scene,

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[28] As Nowak supplants "working" with "smashed glass" as the defining moniker of laboring people, "June 19, 1982" reveals what becomes of the working class when it loses its defining identity. "emptied of / discarded by // vacated / vacant," the working class is both displaced and defined by industrial ruins (69). In the public imaginary, structural decline bespeaks cultural degeneration as "broken window syndrome" sets in, linking disinvested communities with self-perpetuating decay (Russo, John and Sherry Lee Linkon. "The Social Costs of Deindustrialization." *Manufacturing a Better Future for America*. Ed. Richard McCormack. Washington: The Alliance for American Manufacturing, 2009. 183-216. p 192.) Deprived of the present participle, the *working*-class gets lost in the past tense: passive, inactive, already *smashed*. Mirroring back the public image of this non-working class, Nowak equates it with the factories. Both have lost functionality; they are redundant, in ruins.

[29] I don't mean to belabor Ronda's argument, but in tandem with my own, it demonstrates how *Shut Up* invites not only conflicting interpretations depending on the reader's familiarity with its source texts.

Choy and Tajima interweave this iconic footage of "Toyota bashings" with testimonies recalling Vincent Chin's savage beating (Dana 160). In the early 1980s, the car beatings were public spectacles sponsored by the UAW as part of its "Buy American" campaign. By paying a dollar to support laid-off autoworkers, Americans could take up a bat or sledgehammer to literally *beat the competition*. In the film, when an eyewitness recalls how Ebens "'…swung the bat / as if a baseball player // swinging for a home run,/ full contact…'" (87), a clip of one man swinging a sledgehammer through the window of an old Toyota re-plays Ebens's crime. In this strategic pairing, the beaten car becomes an effigy for the man Ebens presumed to be Japanese. Or, rather, Chin's body becomes an effigy for the car – as Ebens reifies his fellow autoworker into an object of foreign competition. Nowak reaffirms this disturbing parallel through the slant-rhyme connecting "Japanese cars / barroom brawls" – thereby linking the Toyotas' smashed glass with the smashed glass of beer bottles from the bar fight that preceded Chin's murder. By reading "June 19, 1982" in tandem with the film that figures so extensively – yet inconspicuously – in this sequence, we discover new sites of fracture and connection. Indeed, we uncover a working class fractured from within, even before "factories deportation." When we recognize the poetic columns of "June 19, 1982" as a collage incorporating the debris of *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, the meaning of "smashed glass class" opens up. I will trace this term across the post/industrial divide. Within this wider historical frame, "June 19, 1982" exposes white working-class men as not only victims of smashed glass ("after factories deportation"), but as agents of fracture – a social "smashing" perpetrated in the name of the "we." Critics have not questioned, but instead romanticize, the working-class "we" in *Shut Up Shut Down*. By focusing on unemployment as the generative conflict in "June 19, 1982," the lost "we" of the workforce becomes an object of nostalgia. Yet Nowak severely critiques the "we" implicit in these poems. Missing from Nowak's invocation of Ebens's infamous invective is the collective statement it makes: reduced to "little motherfuckers" in Nowak's opening couplet, this clipped quotation elides

the *us vs. them* dynamic betrayed by Ebens's cocksure declaration: "It's because of *you* little motherfuckers that *we*'re out of work" (emphasis mine).

"Penis Members Beer" – the graffiti tag from "$00" – sums up Nowak's critique: when industrial labor becomes the basis of masculine self-identity (and vice versa), the loss of work equates to a loss of manhood, fueling compensatory demonstrations of physical power and virility. It is, Nowak reminds us, at a strip club that the confrontation between Ebens and Chin began. Their competition for the affections of a particular dancer symbolically merged with the presumed competition for jobs: both challenges to Ebens's masculine prowess. Nowak lends sexual overtones to the crisis of unemployment, stressing the danger of making industrial labor the basis of masculine identity. In an intricate verbal re-mix, Nowak merges the language of sex and unemployment: "off recently laid" (69) and "laid pink slips off" (77) – demonstrating the dangerously promiscuous blend of labor and sex, imperiled masculinity and sexual dominance. Alcohol, a means of social bonding and stress-release after work, only fueled the misguided rage that erupted on "June 19, 1982," as the bar culture fondly recalled in *Revenants* became the site of self-righteous violence. The collective identity so narrowly defined by Ebens (as well as the Toyota-bashing autoworkers and the misogynistic steelmen in "$00") recalls the (phallus-shaped) monolithic "I" simply repeating itself in bold. Nowak suggests that the "false" plurality of this homogenous subject also defines Ebens's "we." This narrow definition of the worker betrays the white male "member's" fierce reliance on exclusion to render their own identity "coherent." "Penis Members Beer" offers a concise caricature of masculine industrial cultures, but it also conveys the dangerous cocktail of its worst liabilities.

In Detroit in 1982, "[t]he language of solidarity and protest," which Ronda cites as a casualty of lost work, actually fueled the working-class's self-fragmentation. It was the United Autoworkers Union that organized the smashing of Japanese cars in the parking lots of U.S. union halls and auto

155

plants in the early 1980s – to which Nowak tacitly refers in "Japanese cars" and "swinging sledgehammers" (71). These carnivals of destruction were demonstrations of solidarity and protest; yet, charged by xenophobia and exuberant violence, such public displays of aversion betray false consciousness, not a revolutionary collectivism. While Ronda reads workers' silence and invisibility into the white space and drastic line breaks of "June 19, 1982," she ignores its aggressive rhythm. The pounding force of these poems target versions of solidarity that fracture and contract working-class communities while claiming to be inclusive. Ronda notes a "collective vanishing point" of working-class community, but disregards how the (white) working class contributed to its own dissolution by failing to recognize Asian(-American) auto-workers as "comrade[s]" rather than "comprador[s]" (81).[30] "June 19, 1982" indicts this misrecognition, reinforced by racist assimilation imperatives (which "suture class structure / to racialized future" [79]) and by patriotic commercialism: "'Drive your Chevrolet/ through the U.S.A. // America's the greatest land of all'" (81). Nowak's aggressive poems challenge the "legible identity that accompanies employment" (Ronda). Formally, these poems shatter – rather than lament – the "coherence" of working-class identity by exposing how readily (white male) industrial workers submitted to the logic of economic nationalism. Nowak indicates that a "legible" working-class identity grounded in "ubiquitous Whiteness" (69) and "stolen stereotypes" (81) is not worth salvaging.

Shaped by the violence of working-class Detroit, "June 19, 1982" proceeds with a pounding beat: the rhythm of autoworkers smashing cars, or Ronald Ebens beating Vincent Chin. Or the pumping of blood through a burst artery, or through the masculine member (as Nowak's phallic poetry columns suggest). In fact, each poem in "June 19, 1982" takes the shape of a sledgehammer

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[30] As historian and sociologist Thomas Sugrue affirms in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, "discrimination makes economic sense" when workers blame foreign competition instead of holding corporations accountable for importing components from overseas, subcontracting to non-unionized firms, making strategic decisions not to invest in updated manufacturing processes, or automating the production process, which renders domestic workers redundant (122).

(with the bold and italic text forming the head and the right-justified column of poetry forming a handle complete with finger-grips on the left margin). In "June 19, 1982," Nowak metaphorically turns the sledgehammer on core myths of American collectivity: the violent structures of assimilation – and its necessary corollary, exclusion – perpetrated by U.S. corporations, the State, industrial unions, and white working-class men. Somewhat unsettling is the way this destructive rhythm propels Nowak's most virtuosic poetry performance.

Smashed Glass as a "Cry of Art"

In his "Notes toward an Anti-Capitalist Poetics," Nowak champions his favorite poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, whose *In the Mecca*, he argues, "posits an alternative, agitational imagination" in "accounting the cost of the everyday life in late capitalism" (238). Ascribing to Brooks a version of the political-poetic project that Ronda attributes to him, Nowak lauds how Brooks "critiques the deindustrializing landscape of the urban North and explicates a community that has come to be perceived (by the 'white' public) as human detritus among closed factories and shuttered futures." Nowak focuses in particular on Brooks's "remarkable" 'Boy Breaking Glass' and its eponymous hero, "'Whose broken window is a cry of art.'" Although he celebrates how Brooks re-values the Boy's window-smashing (translating his "commission" from the sphere of crime to that of art), Nowak denies such creative agency to the denizens of fracture in "June 19, 1982." The "smashed glass" in his pictures is no "cry of art." Even the graffiti he photographs – "FACTORY BUILT MALICE" – loses its power of protest when Nowak reinterprets it as "maced malaise sprayed."[79] While Brooks's Boy "'has not Congress, lobster, love, luau, / the Regency Room, the Statue of Liberty,'" Nowak asserts that "through the landscape of broken windows and economic decline, the urge to make art in response to the conditions of his life still surges forward." "I shall create!," the

157

Boy swears, "If not a note, a hole. / If not an overture, a desecration."' Yet in "June 19, 1982," the art of creative destruction belongs to Nowak, not the Detroiters he writes about or the people metonymically invoked by the smashed glass and graffiti in his photographs.

Nowak's shards of "labor history" exemplify an agentic artistic response to deindustrialization, akin to the eponymous "Boy breaking glass." With a vigor he denies to the "smashed glass class," Nowak emerges in "June 19, 1982" as *man smashing the old ways of naming the* "*we*." Offset by the inertia of the smashed factories that frame each poem, Nowak's virtuosic break-beats gain a kinetic energy by contrast. In their sledgehammer form and relentless beat, they exceed their fixed textuality both visually and aurally. As Nowak's own artistic "desecration," these poems re-appropriate the destructive energy of Chin's beating, but turn this aggressive force on the deep history of discrimination that has sanctioned violence among workers. Ultimately, "June 19, 1982" delivers a "smashed glass class / *exhortation*" by demanding a more inclusive and robust working-class solidarity that can combat, rather than succumb to, race and gender oppression (71, emphasis mine). These poems do not portray a regrettably lost "coherence," but a working-class that was already in ruins: dis-membered by "white male testosterone [that] found its way out in this weirdly targeted anger" (Personal interview). "June 19, 1982" does not champion the old "legible" forms of union solidarity, but charges them as dangerously inadequate.

Nowak sites his poetry "at a flip moment…the recognition stage that precedes agency" (Personal interview). What, then, does *Shut Up* lead readers to recognize, and what sort of agency could this recognition provoke? Nowak concludes "June 19, 1982" with the resounding indictment that "bones are at the bottom / of the melting pot" (87). The empty structure of the Globe Trading Company warehouse, the final photo in the sequence, could be the "bones" – the leftovers of capitalism that undercuts notions of American labor unity. Or the bones might belong to Vincent

Chin, another casualty of the monolithic white American male "we." Or the bones could be a framework instead of a carcass – the framework of a vigorous, historically-grounded protest. Withholding explication, however, Nowak's protest poetry leaves readers to flesh-out his critique of national and urban-industrial history and, from an activist standpoint, to translate this ruins vision into productive change. I suggested to Nowak that a collateral message of "June 19, 1982" was its "recognition" that deindustrified communities were mired in their own cultural ruins. Nowak's frank response might surprise some of his proponents, as he admitted, "Well that was partly the point. When I was growing up in the '80s, there wasn't much being done to combat the collapse" (Skype interview). Nowak's ruins vision, strongly influenced by his perception of Buffalo's submission to industrial decline, limits the range of his labor history. *Shut Up* represents Nowak's personal ruins vision *applied generously* – beyond his hometown of Buffalo to encompass rural and urban industrial centers throughout the Rust Belt. The result is a remarkably personalized "labor history." Reflecting his personal experience of deindustrialization in the 1980s North-east, *Shut Up* excludes the re-industrialization campaigns in Youngstown and other instances of class consciousness realized, if not successfully, by industrial workers in protest of shut-down. *Shut Up*'s photo-texts frame this history out of view and, in so doing, threaten to dismiss workers' agency or relegate it to the (ruined) past.

From Criticism to Collaboration

In contrast to critics who laud his poetic activism, Nowak severely critiques the political efficacy of his past writing. Reflecting on *Shut Up*, he clarified that, "Although it addressed deindustrialization and the collapse of certain sectors of the urban geography…the book was never able to enter into these larger conversations… [T]o a much larger extent," he confessed, "I took this

159

as a critique of my own poetic practice" (qtd. Metres). Indeed, Nowak's political project to "open a window to the stories and lives of working people and the under and unemployed" conflicts with the way his poetry and photos foreclose on the agency of workers" (qtd. Axelrod). The photo-text poetry in *Shut Up Shut Down* takes the working class as its subject, but it targets an academic audience already primed to unpack hidden allusions and contemplate the relation of formal structure and social message. *Shut Up* is about the working class, not *for* it.

Nowak's pictures of deserted and ravaged buildings proclaim an ending – the pastness of work: both industrial labor and union activity. His use of extant texts (words already uttered, voices already extinguished, speech acts already reified into text blocks – what Nowak calls "poetry as noun") further relegates industrial labor and collectivizing efforts to an irrecoverable time. Reflecting back on his second book, Nowak frames *Shut Up* as "a critique of the national," which presents "the problem of what we did" (Skype interview). From this perspective, Nowak justifies his fixation on workers' disempowerment, and even their violence, as the precursor to his next book, *Coal Mountain Elementary*, which offers, by contrast, a border-transgressive model of trans-national worker subjectivity. In this latest book, "the lives of miners in Sago, WV, and Fuxin, China, are separated by nothing more than the spine of a book" (Nowak qtd. Wagstaff 464). The inter-textuality – and inter-subjectivity – modeled in *Coal Mountain* bridges a different break than the historical rupture between active industry and factory closure that *Shut Up* negotiates. In his recent projects, Nowak goes global by crossing national and geographical divides through his textual re-mixes. And he turns his poetic efforts to collaboration – as he puts it, instead of offering "poetry as noun," he facilitates the creation of "poetry as verb" (Skype interview).

If Nowak intended for *Shut Up* to pivot readers towards working-class activism, this book also served as a "flip point" for Nowak by launching him into "poetry as a social practice" (Personal

interview). In 2005 he facilitated his first "transnational poetry dialogue" between Ford autoworkers

in Minneapolis, Minnesota and Pretoria, South Africa. "For me, especially *Shut Up*," Nowak reflects,

"those are labor history projects rather than labor activism projects…. *Shut Up* is a way to tell labor

history, but it wasn't the activism I was doing at the same time. It was two separate spheres. In a

way, starting the poetry dialogues was a way of bring them together" (Skype interview). This

distinction from Nowak's activist work implicitly de-values *Shut Up*'s intervention in labor history by

relegating it to the status of "noun" – a reified thing lacking the agency and immediacy of the verb.

Yet *Shut Up* – and particularly "June 19, 1982" – catalyzed Nowak's efforts to unite workers across

national borders, as a means of precluding the exploitation of nationalism by corporations and the

State.

The hyper-mobility of global capital draws a striking contrast with the workplace-based

identity of people whose jobs confine them to place. The corporations that workers contend with

are global in scale and stride – multinational conglomerates that marshal tremendous resources,

beyond the power of any localized working-class campaign. Capitalism travels well. Working-class

towns hemmed in by conspicuous architectural decay do not. The working-class, thinking locally,

simply does not have the rallying power to combat capitalism – especially if local resources have

been drained by disinvestment. As Jefferson Cowie states in *Capital Moves*:

> Life space, the space inhabited by conscious actors functioning in the context of
>
> their cultures and communities, consists of territory; this it's the space where workers
>
> struggle and organize. Economic space, in contrast, is abstract and discontinuous.
>
> Capital flows into new locations across the economic and social landscape…
>
> Workers can be relatively effective at the local level, but can only struggle to keep up
>
> with capital's more fluid command of space. (129)

The logic behind the poetry dialogues is that, since multi-national corporations have access to massive communications networks that allow them to move capital (and make life-altering decisions for workers) in fast time, workers themselves should have a similar network at their disposal. The poetry dialogues address this problem by connecting workers through their own writing, in hopes of establishing a continuity, not across timelines, necessarily, but across national borders and geographic spaces.

Politically and poetically, Nowak strives to foster a more inclusive working-class consciousness: a collectivity with enough scope and vigor to challenge neoliberal alliances of government and business "whose endgame, some theorists believe, is the complete eradication of what I've taken to calling the first-person plural. No more collectives, no more unions (remember Reagan and Thatcher) – only individual consumers (Nowak qtd. Wagstaff 462). The point of Nowak's transnational poetry dialogues is to discover *continuities* that reinforce collective working-class consciousness – to bridge spatial and cultural differences as well as national and local loyalties. Expanding the workers' imagined community beyond the bounds of their work- and home-places, these dialogues are designed to recognize and give voice to localized experiences, but to transcend the limits of place-based or face-to-face identifications. The "space" created by the poetry dialogues is open and accommodating, less vulnerable to the closures and power-plays that can devastate places. The transnational poetry dialogues aim to expand workers' sense of community – and their awareness of corporate machinations – beyond the borderlands of the local. The dialogues, in this sense, serve as a form of social enjambment: Nowak explained that,

> [W]ith the poetry dialogues between the workers in Minnesota and South Africa,
> they were able to discover their coworkers. A worker in Minnesota had no idea what
> a South African Ford worker's life was like or job was like, and pretty much thought

they were probably stealing their jobs in a lower wage production system. And

simultaneously the workers in South Africa discovered that when a Ford worker in

America loses their job, this is not a land where everybody has college educations

and lots of money and they just go on to something else. They learn much more

about each other and discover it through this project. The people I worked with had

never had an opportunity to make that kind of connection before. (qtd. Graves)

As Nowak's recent work focuses on collaborative action ("poetry as verb"), he has ceded the

speaking voice to workers so that they become participants in their own (collective) history. In this

respect, Nowak literalizes his role as "listener" by facilitating poetry workshops rather than weaving

his own voice into labor history or using his own experience to frame a broader collective history (a

conspicuous transformation of his poetic persona).

As Nowak extends the socio-spatial ambit of his project – from his hometown of Buffalo to

the Midwest Rust Belt to the dangerous global mining industry – he gradually sheds the lyric in favor

of a depersonalized documentary approach. Nowak's shift from lyrical poetry in *Revenants* to strict

excerpting and editing in *Coal Mountain Elementary*, which allows his working-class subjects a more

sustained voice (and vocal autonomy), strikes at the heart of a conflict surrounding ruins: the

personal at odds with the collective. The phenomenological urge to personalize material remains

conflicts with the ethical imperative to recognize the specific causes of damage and its local

consequences. So do we look back on *Shut Up Shut Down* as a type of ruin, a relic of Nowak's

abandoned aesthetic? Nowak describes it as "poetry as noun," an artifact rather than a dynamic

mode or an active vehicle of expression, to be sidelined because it lacks political use value (Skype

interview). Yet the noun must not be discarded. By working with quotations and photographs,

163

Nowak highlights the history of these "objects" but makes their complex historical relations visible and felt beyond their expected frames.

Epilogue

<u>Rust Belt Redux</u>

My dissertation explores new or under-theorized materials that grapple with a pressing, still-unfolding phenomenon: the Rust-Beltization of America. The diverse texts I have assembled – blogs, fiction, and poetry – represent an unruly historical archive, yet each takes industrial ruins as a starting point, a literal or conceptual frame for thinking through the postindustrial condition. Unfortunately, contemporary scholarship has not kept pace with these timely cultural interventions. Navigating old and new media, my subjects approach the Rust Belt through different sites of engagement: Urban Explorers displace abandonments from residual sites of lived experience to carefully curated websites; Rust Belt fiction responds to the displacement of industry from manufacturing towns by posing a narrative problematic: the inability to access and explain what caused industrial ruin; and Mark Nowak uses the topography of the page to re-place ruination in the context of fragmented working-class communities. Across their different motives and modalities, "Re-Constructing the Rust Belt" traces critical currents that lend a startling coherence to this varied archive – highlighting how artists operating across genres have reinforced social and historic ruptures imposed by industrial capitalism. Seizing on the "pastness" of industrial history, a dominant strain of Urban Explorers, as well as a contingent of literary Rust Belters, have appropriated a "lost" masculine aesthetic of labor and gendered the power dynamics of industry and closure in troubling ways. Even Mark Nowak's concertedly activist poetry perpetuates a gendered division of labor, as

his poeticized women workers embody a communal agency that industrial masculine culture fails to embrace.

This counter-reading of Nowak's activist poetry sits comfortably alongside novel interpretations of UrbEx web texts. By reading deeply in two UrbExers' digital archives, and supplementing this archival work with "live research," I re-frame Urban Explorers' narrative labors as both visual and literary. This critical reframing redresses how UrbExers have been pigeonholed as ruins photographers, even purveyors of "ruin porn." I argue that scholars must attend to the origins of UrbEx praxis, as well as individual participants' photo-text dynamics in order to discern the sort of consciousness that Urban Exploring proffers. Because UrbExers embark on historical inquiry by trespassing, they avoid "locals"; as a collateral effect, they tend to avoid community-based histories. Their publications shift their viewer's interest from buildings themselves (and their local social contexts) by re-locating ruin to the Web. This deliberate shift allegedly protects the buildings from public infiltration, but it filters historical understanding through the Explorers' images of found objects. This mode of engagement, I argue, fosters a selective historical consciousness.

While Urban Explorers seize narrative agency in the absence of industrial managers and laborers, characters in Rust Belt fiction lose access to history through industrial ruin. My Rust Belt fiction chapter re-conceptualizes this burgeoning genre beyond a regional category. It examines how new and established authors adapt literary conventions to address a narrative crisis fundamental to Rust Belt inquiry: how do we interpret the evidence of industrial violence when this evidence is (in) ruins? Foundational to Rust Belt fiction, I argue, is an emerging group of texts that explore how industrial ruins, as seminal products of late capitalism, confound local understanding. Facing the traumatic un-narratability of industrial violence (extending from dangerous labor to economic decline), Rust Belt fiction produces narrative strategies for coping with the social and historic

ruptures imposed by industrial capitalism. Both Rust Belt characters – and the novels they narrate – navigate these ruptures through an industrial unconscious.

If Rust Belt fiction dis-membered its working-class characters from their histories, Mark Nowak deliberately re-members working-class history through visual-textual remixes. Whereas critics have heralded Nowak's activist poetry as nostalgic for industrial unionism, I offer a crucial counter-reading. By formally examining his poetic collages – as a complex interplay of aesthetics and politics – I demonstrate how *Shut Up* weaves texts and timelines to draw readers across the "post/industrial break," thereby illuminating an ongoing process of abandonment and ruin. My reading helps redefine the kind of activist resistance that Nowak's poetry calls for. He advocates, not a return to old union cultures, but a more robust collective consciousness that transcends the fragmentation of the working class along the faultlines of race, gender, and generation.

Lacking an established historiography to hone my interpretations, I seek an analytical framework that registers the distinctive qualities of my subjects but allows for conversation among them. I felt that triangulating these sources would offer a flexible, relational approach to investigating their common grounds. Rather than providing an overt structure, this relational mode proves latent in my analysis, emerging through mobile questions posed by individual chapters but critically informing my larger investigation. For example, Urban Explorers lead us to question: at what distance (in time, space, or social experience) do sublime industrial ruins – encountered as architectural objects or photographic image – afford or block access to history? UrbEx raises another question that Rust Belt fiction self-consciously pursues: how do we interpret the *clues* of industrial ruin? Instead of indices that trace back a clear path of causality to a perpetrator, Rust Belt ruins index their own ruination; they are clues to loss, rather than clues to identifiable histories. As if in response to this rupture that ruins represent, Mark Nowak posits a dialectic of continuity and

167

discontinuity. The form of his collage poetry, no less than its quoted speakers, draws attention to breaks. Registering the devastating breaks that deindustrialization causes, Nowak bridges these breaks through history and thereby proposes historical knowledge as a precursor to social agency. *Shut Up* mobilizes a question crucial to critical and artistic investigation of the Rust Belt: how does the subject manage rupture and continuity? Through my analysis of Nowak's poetry, I posit this dialectic as a crucial element of Rust Belt inquiry. In a field that does not yet know itself, we can achieve a surer footing by remaining self-conscious of the temporal, social, and textual borders we draw, and the breaks and connections we trace across these boundaries.

Rust Belt Re-Visited

My dissertation explores the Rust Belt as a conjunction of narratives pursued at various sites of inquiry. In the next phase of this project, I would like to self-consciously pursue my own site of engagement. I entered this project through Braddock, Pennsylvania, a borough less than two square miles in size where the Edgar Thomson Plant remains one of the few operative steel mills in the United States. Braddock is the site of Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill and free library, but in the twenty-first century, the borough has become renowned as "the poster child for decaying mill towns" (Fox) – "the hardest-hit example of hundreds of de-industrialized places" (Straub and Liebendorfer). Although Pittsburgh has revitalized its economy through biomedical research and finance education, many towns surrounding the former "steel city" remain in critical condition.[1] Growing up, I visited several of these towns every holiday. Three generations of my relatives, including my great-grandfathers, grandparents, parents, and many of my aunts, uncles, and cousins

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[1] For a more detailed account of Pittsburgh's revitalization as a diversified metropolitan economy, see James J. Connolly, *After the Factory: Reinventing America's Industrial Small Cities* (2010).

worked in the steel mills and in large-structure fabrication in Braddock, East Pittsburgh, Wilmerding, and Homestead. Most of my living relatives still reside there. It feels naively romantic to say that my roots are in the Rust Belt, but I feel a complex if tenuous connection to "leftover" manufacturing communities. In the next iteration of my project, I plan to incorporate my investigations of recent claims on Braddock's postindustrial landscape and Rust Belt identity as a means to ground and develop questions of social agency and appropriation that my work has raised.

Braddock in particular resonates with me because it is a landmark on the American literary map. Along with its sister town of Homestead, Braddock furnished the setting for at least a dozen proletarian novels and short stories, including Lauren Gilfillan's *I Went to Pitt College* (1934), Phillip Bonosky's *Burning Valley* (1953), and John Hoerr's recent *Monongahela Dusk* (2009). This leftist literary legacy led me to question what kinds of stories were being written about Braddock in its – and my relatives' – "post-proletarian" moment; this question is especially relevant now that Edgar Thomson has downsized to 9% of its peak employment and, as Braddock's mayor often remarks, "literally 90% of our buildings are in the landfill" (Fetterman). After hearing that Mayor John Fetterman gave tours of his town, I contacted him for an interview. Eager to put Braddock on display, Mayor John (as he likes to be called) welcomed my questions and coordinated my stay in an abandoned house-turned-hostel by the Braddock Active Arts collective.

Braddock is not only physically decimated; it is economically ravaged and frequently dangerous. When I entered the borough in 2008, immediately after passing the "Welcome to Braddock" sign, I saw one man pick up a brick from the piles of demolition rubble littering Library Street and strike another man with it. This altercation playing out on Braddock's main thoroughfare was spectacularly frightening, and I knew it belied Braddock's many other stories. Mayor John calls Braddock "gentrification-proof," too "blighted" to appeal to corporate investors, but he revalues the

169

remnants of economic failure as "malignant beauty" (Fetterman). The mayor redefines blight, turning the stigma on corporations that "take over struggling towns and homogenize everything. They don't care about people – just profit margins – and frankly they're as devastating to residents as the closure of the factories" (Interview). The Homestead revitalization project offers a visible counterpoint to Mayor John's alternative ethos for rebuilding community. On the site of the Homestead Steelworks across the Monongahela River, a vast "Waterfront" mall and condominiums have established a strong tax base by displacing working-class communities. Mayor John, who first came to Braddock as an Americorps volunteer working with "at-risk" youth, confirms his priority of "helping these people live and keep living in their own hometown" (Interview). However, his own strategies for improving living conditions risk displacing residents *narratively* if not physically. As deputy mayor Jeb Feldman proudly declared to me in 2008, "We invite anyone with a plan to come to Braddock. If you have a creative idea, take an abandoned building, and use the town's rich resources to realize your vision" (Interview). This invitation has attracted urban farmers from New York. An artist colony has established itself. Small-scale entrepreneurs in bee-keeping, beer brewing, and alternative energy have taken residence. Mayor John's emphasis on creative freedom in Braddock speaks almost exclusively to opportunities for people who do not (yet) live or work in the borough. His invitation to (re)creation, rather than restoration, casts Braddock as historically rich raw material or as a canvas on which outsiders can express themselves.

Mayor John does not shy away from Braddock serving as an "end of times" backdrop. In 2008-2009, he welcomed a movie studio to use the wreckage of Braddock's downtown for the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic *On the Road*. Dimension Films paid to take advantage of Braddock's ruined vistas, then left. In 2010 the Levi's corporation renovated an abandoned church in Braddock, transforming it into a community center in exchange for using the town's distressed condition as their jeans campaign. A series of Levi's commercials appropriate

Braddock's legacy of masculine industrial labor, but reposition this work as a re-building effort. The company's "Go Forth" and "Let's get back to work" campaigns conflate wearing Levi's jeans, doing physical labor, and performing meaningful work – exemplified by the "rebuilding" of Braddock's community center (*Levi's*). Mayor John registers no qualms with these corporate structures engaging with the town as a sight of ruin, using its resources for their own promotional purposes, and infusing some money for the right to do so before leaving. Revisiting Braddock between 2008 and 2012, I came to see the town as a collection of narratives, some competing and contradictory, but ultimately cohabiting a lived space of experience intertwining long-term residents and "urban pioneers." This confluence of claims on Braddock's lived space and its social identity catalyzed my research into Rust Belt narratives. I sought to discover who was writing about industrial ruins, and what sort of postindustrial consciousness – and agency – their engagements fostered and expressed.

The Grounds of Authenticity

In writing my dissertation, I found that all of the artists I examined make claims to being one or two degrees removed from the experience of industrial work or the people who performed it and survived its fallout. I made my own similar claims in the previous section, testifying to my desire to legitimate my interpretations of the ruins of people's lives and livelihoods. In this way, I am no different than Mark Nowak proclaiming that his family worked in industry. Urban Explorers profess an authority to narrate industrial history because they have touched the material objects that workers touched. Seeing the huge leftover machinery, lifting fifty-pound wrenches, mANVIL claims to understand *firsthand* that labor was difficult. Many UrbExers' disdain for museums and textbooks reveals what they feel to be their more authentic perspective on industrial history. Even Michael Collins, on his personal website, emphasizes that as a student at Notre Dame and as an ultra-

marathon runner-in-training, he ran through Rust Belt towns, witnessed their devastation *firsthand*, and even sustained a stab wound there. In an interview, Richard Russo confirms that he wrote *Empire Falls* while living in a mill town in Maine, where he observed the sale, mortgaging, and closure of the Hathaway Shirt Company (qtd. Peter Smith). In the opening poetry sequence of *Shut Up Shut Down*, Mark Nowak inserts himself into industrial history as a short-order cook who listened to myriad stories from former steel workers and Westinghouse employees in Buffalo, as if to prove that he is a valid witness to industrial labor and the consequences of its ending. These authorial claims variously define what it means to be *on the ground*, leading us to question what constitutes participation, witnessing, or experience of the Rust Belt (itself variously defined as a site, a social condition, or a transformative historical process).

In order to more effectively analyze these personal and public narratives, I developed my own forms of participation by observing Urban Explorers photographing buildings and by interviewing UrbExers, Michael Collins, and Mark Nowak. This proximity to my sources involves clear payoffs and drawbacks. For instance, I gained new insight by interviewing Michael Collins, who revealed his impatience with Rust Belt residents for what he perceives as their lack of political will. As he sees it, many Rust Belters are disaffected by their postindustrial condition, but lack the creative energy to imagine ways out. He confessed, "Really, I saw South Bend as a grotesque pageant. If it had been Ireland, we would have gotten drunk and thrown a bomb" (Email interview). Yet, through intimacy established in conversations about my subjects' work – discussing their motives, concerns, and self-critiques – I found it sometimes more and sometimes less difficult to critique their work. There is always the risk of being influenced by an artist's perception of his project. Questions about the balance of proximity and distance that could best serve my analysis resonate with similar issues in my subjects' engagements with Rust Belt themes and people. When

does one's closeness to a subject yield more insight, and when does it become a liability foreclosing on important views?

I foresaw that texts addressing industrial labor would be gender-conscious – even gender-specific, since the manual labor in steel mills and large manufacturing plants was predominantly performed by men. Yet I was surprised to learn how dominant a role gendered ideologies play in my texts – as the writers and artists I analyzed gendered both industrial labor and deindustrialization as predominantly male. My dissertation work has alerted me to the crucial role that gender plays in cultural narratives processing labor and decline. Why does gender performance play such a formative role in narrating economic change? Does the gendered scripting of industrial history and the postindustrial condition reflect regressive nostalgia and unconscious resentments, or a progressive acknowledgment of gendered divisions of labor that persist into the present?

The Framework of Ruins

In searching for texts that narrate industrial ruin, I discovered that much Rust Belt art begins with the sight of industrial abandonments as a conceptual starting-point. In spite of their differences in tone, form, and politics, my diverse subject-texts all enter the Rust Belt through the symbolic or literal frame of industrial ruins. Taking this point of entry as a basis of comparison, my greatest challenge involved casting a net across the multiplicity of engagements, representational strategies, and claims within and across my subjects: vernacular photo-texts, popular fiction, and activist poetry. Retrospectively, I found that three parameters offered analytic purchase on my subjects' strategies for reading the Rust Belt. I devised x, y, z axes for interpreting their artistic engagements: the landscape of ruins, the social condition of the postindustrial, and the transformative process of deindustrialization.

I found that each text engaged with some combination of the three – privileging one and subordinating the others or otherwise redefining their interrelations. Examining three different genres of engagement with the Rust Belt, I found that UrbExers immerse themselves in the ruins, privilege their own process of exploring, and consider the postindustrial to be their personal, empowering condition. Rust Belt novels explore the consciousness of communities whose members Urban Explorers deliberately avoid. This emerging body of fiction explores how "ruined" people grapple with deindustrialization on the stage of industrial ruin and its fallout. Yet, their characters demonstrate scant understanding of the processes that led them to ruin. The experiences of industrial labor or downsizing and layoffs receive little dramatic attention in these narratives, few of which make laid-off workers their focal characters. Finally, in *Shut Up Shut Down*, Nowak takes a definitive, if critically misunderstood, stand on industrial labor history. He expressed to me his intent of taking the working class to the edge of agency, tipping them towards meaningful resistance. Ironically, *Shut Up* demands that the working class transform its consciousness, ceasing to be overwhelmed by post-industrial ruins – by showing us abandoned buildings. Nowak strips these buildings of their visual interest, downplaying the parameter of ruins and denying prevailing narratives of prosperity and loss – in order to shift his readers' attention to the ongoing process of capitalist exploitation. Nowak's professed mission was for *Shut Up* to provoke working-class people to rally in solidarity, but the agency the book promotes remains in question.

Sites/Sights for Future Work

Braddock presents a new site of engagement through which I can investigate the Rust Belt: the site of the city itself. Braddock illuminated for me the possible tensions between an artist's expressive agency and the social agency conferred on or denied to her audience and subjects.

174

Swoon, a celebrated street artist from New York City, has glued wheat paper portraits of urban people to the brick walls of Braddock's remaining infrastructure.[2] By the use of this light-weight paper and the tenuous grip of wallpaper glue, Swoon's portraits are made to fade, tear, and blow away over time. Her art testifies to the vulnerability of the town and the ephemerality of work and identity in neglected places. If her intended audience was the residents of Braddock, her art implicitly mirrors back to them their own defeat, like telling a patient her condition is terminal. Some residents have expressed their displeasure with Swoon's approach and its implication that the people of Braddock are ruined and fading. Swoon's site-specific art leads us to question whose agency it reflects. For whom do Swoon's portraits work? In whom do they seek to foster a change of consciousness? Considering Swoon's work in the context of my case studies, I question how it differs from UrbExer photos that neglect the lived experiences of Rust Belt residents in order to make personalized artistic statements about industrial ruins. Since Swoon locates her art *in* the community, her work raises issues of narrative agency and the ethics of representation that can help us pursue the implications of other digital, literary, and activist engagements circulating in and beyond the Rust Belt.

Braddock-born photographer LaToya Frazier raises similar issues of (self-)representation through self-portraits in the condemned house where her steel-working grandfather died. As an African American, her grandfather was excluded from the cultural memory of Braddock's (white ethnic) proletarian history. I argue that by picturing herself shrouded in the blanket in which her grandfather died (from a lung disease related to steelwork), Frazier re-works images of entrapment from proletarian literature.[3] Mike Gold's long poem "A Strange Funeral In Braddock" centers on a

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[2] See for instance: Swoon. "Children on UnSmoke building – 1135 Braddock Ave, Braddock, PA 15104." Photograph. *Pittsburgh's Outdoor Murals and Art: Discoveries made while biking in the 'Burgh*. n.d. Web. 30 Aug. 2014.

[3] See: Hodin, Rachel. "Image 12." Photograph. "Ain't No Party Like an Art Party: Whitney Biennial 2012." *Opening Ceremony New News*. 1 March 2012. Web. 29 Aug. 2014. Also see: Eler, Alicia. "Photographs Behind Closed Doors." *Hyperallergic: Sensitive to Art & its Discontents*. 24 Sept. 2013. Web. 29 Aug. 2014.

laborer entombed in hardened steel. Instead covering herself in her grandfather's "sick blanket,"
Frazier makes it another kind of industrial tomb. Although these photographs portray depressing
conditions of disease, suffering, and neglect, they are perhaps more empowering than Swoon's art
because they convey empathy and understanding that Swoon's slow-time performance of ruin lacks.

Both Swoon's and Frazier's work have garnered praise as activist art. The subject positions
they foreground, as well as their media and modes of circulating their work, underscore questions of
agency related to Nowak's activist projects. Although he desired to represent Rust Belters' history,
Shut Up expressed his censure for the fractures dividing the working-class by making allusions to
obscure texts, in a complex style aimed at trained readers. It's difficult to see how his experimental
poetry would lead non-academics to the edge of action or empower working-class people to seize
agency. After speaking with Nowak, I learned that *Shut Up* inspired a poetic crisis for him, leading
him to strip away his own lyric expression and create space for workers to express themselves at
length in his next book, *Coal Mountain Elementary*. In this book, voices from the working class take
precedence over the poet's voice, especially as the book is performed in working-class communities.

Since the artists I investigate work in the present, adapting their style in real-time to address
the unfolding circumstances of the Rust Belt, it has been difficult to cement an understanding of
their engagements. My sources are moving objects, and their agility in addressing changing social
conditions contributes to their cultural agency. How can I, as a contemporary scholar, analyze work
that proves so agile in its transformation? Michael Collins sent me a manuscript for his next book in
process, but then he abandoned this work. Can I refer to something that was never published and
so, like one of Robert Smithson's "ruins in reverse," remains incomplete but also formative in my
understanding of Collins's investment in the Rust Belt? UrbEx narratives published to the web
prove ephemeral. And Mark Nowak's poetry, now read at poetry-shares in union halls and at

demonstrations by service workers and mining communities, changes with each performance. As my subject texts circulate beyond my original mode of engagement (with UrbEx photos printed in books or hung on gallery walls; Collins's *Keepers* packaged as a Scribner "book club" offering, complete with discussion questions; and Nowak's poetry turning to collaborative performances), I reflect on their cultural "afterlives." Some of these afterlives are traceable, but some have been cut short by deletion. As I move on to Braddock to examine the range of claims made on its ruins and on the social condition of its residents, the challenges – and the stakes – of my engagements intensify. My interviews can produce unexpected afterlives for ephemeral works, such as Swoon's wheat paper portraits and my conversations with residents about how they respond to her art. My research can re-construct an archive of Rust Belt engagements at a still point within our volatile historical moment of decaying and becoming.

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