In this book, I consider poems published in the United States since 1979 that directly engage with national and global politics. I show that over the past 35 years some of America’s leading poets became discerning witnesses of their country’s transformation from self-appointed defender of freedom and democracy to powerful if uncertain keeper of the “new world order.” In ways that are artistically remarkable and intellectually probing, these poets registered signs of violent resistance to America’s domination, including the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent US wars with Afghanistan and Iraq. They also took part in public debates concerning the meaning of nation, state, and empire following the unprecedented expansion of free markets and communication technologies. My examples include three poems that illustrate the experience of being American at this juncture in global history: Robert Pinsky’s *An Explanation of America* (1979), Adrienne Rich’s “An Atlas of the Difficult World” (1991), and Amiri Baraka’s “Somebody Blew Up America” (2001). In the second half of my book, I discuss Juliana Spahr’s *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005), Ben Lerner’s *Angle of Yaw* (2006), Lisa Jarnot’s *Iliad XXII* (2006), Mark Nowak’s *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009), Anne Boyer’s *My Common Heart* (2011), and Rodrigo Toscano’s *Deck of Deeds* (2012). As I demonstrate, these younger poets also find compelling ways to reinvigorate the tradition of public-oriented poetry in English.

My argument is that in the era of globalized economy, culture, and increasingly politics, US poets take it upon themselves to perform the role of public intellectuals. In doing so, they raise important questions about poetry and its social value. Throughout my study, I trace the extent to which poetry, as a language-based art form and an affect-producing tool, imparts...
knowledge about today’s rapidly changing world. I also consider the predicament faced by every American poet gifted with civic ambition: *How to write poems for people who don’t read poems.*

Since the early 1990s, New Americanist scholarship has treated American literature not as an isolated, monolithic, self-contained phenomenon but as a product of interplay between local and global discourses. As they examine texts in relation to worldwide circulation of languages, genres, traditions, and influences, New Americanists champion the practice of reading them in ways that bypass or at least problematize the national framework. For example, John Carlos Rowe calls for an advancement of methodologies based on “the terms of intracultural and intercultural affiliation by means of which we can transcend successfully the monolingual and monocultural myth of ‘America’ that is both a political and intellectual anachronism.” Wai Chee Dimock proposes to replace the nation-based approach to literary studies with the concept of “deep time” or what she defines as “a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going in both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric.” Donald E. Pease recommends a shift “away from US culture and society as an identifiable unit so as to effect a redescription of the US as inhabiting but one node in a vast interlocking network of commercial, political, and cultural forces.” Paul Giles promotes a revisionary approach to American literary studies “to bring near and far into juxtaposition, to remap the field according to a logic of parallax so as to elucidate spaces where local and national and transnational overlap, often in potentially troublesome or even incoherent ways.”

Until recently, New Americanist scholarship has been slow to acknowledge poetry’s contribution to shaping the new transnational (or multinational, postnational, supranational) paradigm, bearing out Joseph Harrington’s assertion, made in a provocatively entitled article, that despite the changing configuration of the field, and with the notable exception of Walt Whitman, “poetry seems to be beside the point of American literature.” As Mary Loeffelholz observes, the past two decades have seen a surge in the availability of poetry anthologies and poetry scholarship that reflect the innovative approaches, with particular attention given to texts that foreground gender, ethnic, and class-based models of identity. In the scholarship category, she justly singles out Cary Nelson’s pioneering *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory* (1989). Other studies, whether conceived as “recovery” projects or as analyses of poetry as “the social form,” are too numerous to list by this point. Suffice it to say that these studies have opened the door to various poets previously kept outside of the (already hotly disputed) canon of twentieth-century American poetry.