Several critics have sought to identify the basic tenor of contemporary poets’ engagements with political issues in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Christopher Nealon detects a “slightly camp attitude that creeps into poetic attempts to measure the approach to end-times when the idea of end-times seems itself outmoded”; as they struggle to imagine alternatives to capitalism, poets like Claudia Rankine and Kenneth Davies adopt a “strange, unstable rhetoric” that privileges hybrid forms and citational devices in response to the global spectacle of newspapers, TV, popular movies, and the Internet. Joseph Harrington calls attention to “a flourishing of documentary literary forms” in the past decade, exemplified by poets like Susan M. Schultz, Jena Osman, Gabriel Gudding, and many others. The goal of such “creative nonpoetry” is not simply to reproduce existing textual material but to reframe it artistically and skeptically so that “narrative, conceptual, and emotional connections are left to the reader to draw…. Sometimes the documents don’t even tell a story, but rather produce lyrical and affective responses to the narratives from which they are drawn.” Brian Reed looks at a variety of creative practices subsumed under the labels “conceptual writing” and “Flarf.” In reaction to the unprecedented proliferation of data made available especially by the Internet, poets like Vanessa Place, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Rachel Zolf, among others, develop a “poetics of redirected language” to show that “it might no longer be tenable to separate our sense of ourselves from the information that we take in—or the manner in which we do so.”1
Although their examples and emphases vary, these overviews by Nealon, Harrington, and Reed clarify one general trend in the ways American poets (and some Canadian ones) respond to the present global situation. Many of these poets seem fascinated with the artistic potential of found language—or, rather, language deliberately chosen from a vast reservoir of global production and consumption. As we noted earlier, the same appropriative practice informs the work of Spahr, Lerner, and Jarnot, and even, to a certain extent, that of their predecessors (Pinsky’s unattributed borrowings, Rich’s intertextual maneuvers, Baraka’s lists and allusions). No matter what their source or strategy, the challenge that today’s poets set for themselves is how to develop the necessary savvy to separate truth from untruth, how to distinguish what is valuable to our lives from what is redundant.

In Chapter 4, I demonstrated with just a handful of examples how the tradition of civic poetry in the United States was reinvigorated following 9/11 and the subsequent military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq under the guise of War on Terror. The decade also witnessed the rise of the antiglobalization movement that culminated with the Occupy Wall Street protest in the fall of 2011. The idea that poetry can meaningfully involve itself with social and political protest, or even become part of a larger demand for change, suddenly began to seem more plausible. It is certainly in evidence when we peruse several poetry anthologies published during that period, not only Poets against the War (2003) but also Joshua Beckman and Matthew Zapruder’s State of the Union: 50 Political Poems (2008) and Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray’s The New American Poetry of Engagement (2012). The relation of poetry and politics was also frequently debated in journals like Boston Review, Chicago Review, and Lana Turner, on listservs and blogs, during conferences, festivals, and symposia. The numerous poems, critiques, exchanges, and manifestos that emerged from these occasions provide a valuable record of contemporary poetry’s involvement with the antiglobalization movement.

From many possible examples, I again select three books written by poets who directly or indirectly participated in these conversations: Mark Nowak’s Coal Mountain Elementary (2009), Anne Boyer’s My Common Heart (2011), and Rodrigo Toscano’s Deck of Deeds (2012). I argue that, through their skillful and intelligent handling of appropriated material, these poets make the political and economic arrangements of global capitalism recognizable to their readers. As Foucauldian “specific” intellectuals, they also view their creative work as an extension of their activism. Thus Nowak, in his 2006 essay “Notes toward an Anticapitalist Poetics” (written for a Virginia Quarterly Review symposium on Adrienne Rich), calls for an oppositional practice that “addresses, engages, and critiques the policies and practices