

Wu Ming Interview

11/23/09, New York City

Introduction:

The Wu Ming Foundation is a collective of four self-described “guerrilla novelists” based in Bologna, Italy. The collective was born in 1994, when hundreds of European and South American artists, activists, and pranksters hijacked the name of a Black British football player who briefly played as a striker for AC Milan during the 1980s. Blissett, who left Italy after being subjected to racist taunts from fans and players alike, metamorphosed into a multiple-use name or “open reputation” known as the Luther Blissett Project. For their contribution to the Luther Blissett Project, the four writers who are now Wu Ming penned *Q*, an epic account of radical Anabaptist rebels in central Europe during the 16th century. The novel became a bestseller in Italy, and has been translated into twelve languages. *Q* was published under Copyleft, allowing reproduction of the text for non-commercial purposes three years before Creative Commons licenses were developed. In 1999, the year of *Q*’s publication, the Luther Blissett Project ended its five-year plan and dissolved itself. A year later, the authors of *Q* reconstituted themselves as the Wu Ming Foundation, choosing a Mandarin moniker that means “anonymous” and that pays tribute to Chinese dissidents, who often sign their demands for freedom of speech with this tag. The collective’s anonymity is also a conscious refusal of the cult of celebrity that increasingly affects writing and culture in general. The group’s first publication under their new name was *54*, a novel that chronicles the adventures of Cary Grant after he decides to work for the British secret service, leading to a picaresque narrative in which the movie star travels to Yugoslavia to meet Marshall Tito. Members of the group have also each written “solo” novels. In addition, during the early part of the decade, they played an important role in the anti-capitalist movement in Italy. Verso Books published their novel *Manituana* in English translation in spring 2009. *Manituana* tells the story of the American Revolution from the perspective of the Native Americans who side with the British Empire against the colonial army. The book is at the center of a complex trans-media storytelling project anchored by the Wu Ming Foundation’s website (www.wumingfoundation.com). The group’s most recent novel, *Altai*, has just been published to critical acclaim in Italy.

Interlocutors:

Wu Ming 1 [Wu]

Gabriella Coleman [GC] – a member of the *Social Text* collective

Ashley Dawson [AD] – a member of the *Social Text* collective

Marco Deseriis [MD] – a member of the Luther Blissett Project

AD: Can you tell us about the origin of the collective working method used by Wu Ming?

Wu: There is no fixed method. It changes over time, it evolves over time, and it depends on the nature of the book that we’re writing and the transformations of our lives. For example, when we wrote *Q*, none of us were married. Now, we’re all married and three of us have children. What does that mean? It means that the way you organize your time is completely different. The way you put together a schedule of work with the other members of the group is totally different. Which means

that the method changes as well. There are some fixed features that don't change; for example, the fact that we start from historical research. Before writing a single line, we study the period, we study the historical sources for months and months before developing a story. We start from a vague suggestion because we're fascinated by a historical period or a particularly historical event, a macro-event like the American Revolution, or the Reformation in the case of *Q*, or the Cold War, so we start to do research, going to libraries, etc. Research is always the first stage of work. After that, we have notes and other material generated by the historical research, and we use it to play a kind of Role Playing Game. We sit around a table and we start to throw each other names and places and dates and small summaries of what happened in a particular place and time on the initiative of a particular character. We start to improvise stories. We're interested in stories and connections, in linking stories. Things that took place in different regions and years – perhaps they have something in common, maybe we can find common causes and common outcomes of those events. We start to link them. This way we find that lumps of narrative matter, as it were, start to take shape on the table. And we start playing with them like kids playing with clay, until we have a skeleton of the structure of the novel. It's not exactly a script, but it's close to it. Usually three quarters of the story is already clear in our minds, but not the ending. The ending must be a surprise for us, otherwise we wouldn't have fun writing the novel. Then we divide the story into macro-sequences, each of which we divide into chapters. Usually we divide the sequences into many chapters, but most of our chapters are short. Long chapters are the exception, and readers always perceive a change of register, a change of tone, and a change of pace when, all of a sudden, there's a long chapter. It signals something: a turning point in the novel. But most chapters are very short. And each one of us takes one chapter – we usually write four chapters at a time because there are now four members in the collective – and, once we've written them, we meet and read the chapters aloud and start discussing them. We then start improvising solutions to the problems that each one of us perceived in the text that's being read aloud.

GC: Do you have the computer in front of you and make the changes right then? How are the new suggestions recorded?

Wu: No, it's like music to us, it's an aural experience. For us, it's like listening to poetry. But there's one member who's in charge of each rewrite. The material keeps being reprocessed, keeps being rewritten, until it satisfies us all. And, once we're satisfied, we store that particular chapter in the *filone*, our big file of completed drafts.

AD: So the decision about when chapters are finished is consensus based? What happens if one person digs their heels in?

Wu: We raise the stakes. We get more ambitious. We don't find a lower ground for compromise. If one of us disagrees pig-headedly, it means that something isn't working with the chapter, that it's not radical enough, that it's not ambitious enough. So we raise the stakes with even bolder ideas, and usually it works. We look for a higher compromise not a lower one, a bolder synthesis not a settlement. But it changes over time, as I said initially. Sometimes the first stage of historical research is shorter, sometimes we keep going with the research while we're writing. That's what happened with *Manituana*, but not with *Q*. When we wrote *Q*, we spent six months reading dozens and dozens of books on the Reformation, on the peasant wars, on radical movements in 16th century central Europe, on the Inquisition. And then for the next two and a half years we didn't read anything else – we'd stored so much information that we felt...

GC: You publish using pseudonyms, and so I was wondering how the influence of some thinkers who write about the historical period makes its way into the text. There's no mechanism for explicit citation, but there are clearly some thinkers you prefer over others.

Wu: Usually our political and philosophical ideas are so close to each other that there isn't significant disagreement over the historical interpretation of the historical materials. We discuss the sources, we discuss interpretations written by historians, and usually we agree. We're all Marxist by formation and education, and usually it's rare that someone says, "I completely disagree with the fact that the peasant war was a class war." There are some thinkers and historians who wrote important books on the subjects we're researching, but unsurprisingly we don't find their work very useful. For example, we didn't use *The Pursuit of the Millennium* by Norman Cohen because it's heavily influenced by a liberal – in the European, conservative sense rather than the American, left-leaning one – interpretation of what happened, and he sees Thomas Münzer and Jan of Leyden and other Anabaptist radicals as precursors to Adolph Hitler. Of course, we totally disagree, and we think that his reconstruction of the facts is heavily biased by his political orientation. We used other historians such as Carlo Ginzburg and Adriano Prosperi that seemed more useful to us. But there's no big disagreement about possible historical interpretation of particular events.

GC: But is there an explicit way to register your influences? You do research just like us, so I wonder if there's a way to mark out your influences in a way similar to that of an academic researcher?

Wu: But novelists have a different job. We have to keep the influences as hidden as possible, otherwise the novel would suck.

MD: Right, otherwise it would become an illustrated essay. I mean, if you read their novels there's also the component of the thriller genre.

GC: And so educated readers can pick out these influences from the text and articulate them for others to see.

AD: Yes, and there's a real collaborative aspect to your work with the broader public outside your collective. Can you talk about this a little about this?

Wu: We actively extend our collaborative stance to the wider community of our readers. Many of our readers send us contributions to the world that we build in our fictions, be it graphic novels or videos or music or any other kind of media, language, and platform. This always happened, without our solicitation. It felt natural to people to do this. But with the publication of *Manitwana* we made this collaborative project more explicit, and people keep sending us things. As recently as last week we received a new short story inspired by the novel.

MD: And you also use Google Earth.

Wu: Yes, it was pretty unusual at the time that we first did this, two years ago. We used Google Earth to allow readers to see the actual places where the action in *Manitwana* was set, allowing people to re-explore the places where the action unfolds.

GC: Can you talk about your use of modified copyright license?

Wu: All our output is freely reproducible by any means. You can Xerox the books or download the books for free from our website. We've been doing this for fifteen years now. We started when we were involved in our former project, the Luther Blissett Project. Actually, our output then was completely anti-copyright. But when we published *Q* we had to protect our work in some way. Had the book been completely anti-copyright, a movie producer could have stolen it, made a movie, made a lot of money without paying us, and strengthened his dominant position in the marketplace, which was of course the opposite of the outcome we had in mind when we started. So we used a modified copyright notice saying that reproduction is completely free for noncommercial purposes, but that commercial producers have to negotiate with us and pay us a share of the revenues. That was three years before Creative Commons licenses, which were rolled out in 2002, were devised.

MD: I'd like to focus on a potential contradiction here. The Einaudi publishing house with whom you publish your work was bought by the Mondadori Group, which is part of Berlusconi's Mediaset company. Some activists say that it doesn't matter that your work is anti-copyright, because you're still bringing profits to the enemy.

Wu: Einaudi is part of the Mondadori Group, and the main shareholder is Berlusconi's Mediaset. But editorial control of Einaudi is not automatic, there's always conflict. And most Leftist writers decided to stay with Einaudi because it's a treasure for the Left in Italy, and we didn't want to leave that ground to the Right. We wanted to defend that ground, waiting for Berlusconi to die. Because I'm sure that Einaudi will still exist after Berlusconi is gone.

MD: So, using Gramscian terminology, you think that cultural hegemony trumps the political economy of the present?

Wu: I think so, in the long run. I think that the ownership of the publishing house by Mediaset is an important issue in the short term, while cultural hegemony is an investment in the long term. Not just Wu Ming, but many other authors are doing the same thing. And it's also the best publisher in Italy. The Einaudi publishing house was founded in the 1930s under the fascist dictatorship. And they were an anti-fascist publisher under the dictatorship. The first editorial board was arrested and some of them were beaten to a bloody pulp and even killed in prison, so they have a tradition that Berlusconi can't appropriate. He can fuck with it, but he can't appropriate it.

AD: I want to ask you a very different question, one about history. Postcolonial theorists spend a lot of time worry about the politics of representation, particular of the subaltern whose voices, strictly speaking, are lost to history. Is this an issue you worry about, particularly when writing a book like *Manituana*?

Wu: But our books are never only from the perspective of the defeated, the subaltern. It's more nuanced, more complex than that. For example, in *Altai*, our latest novel, we describe the war on Cyprus, the siege of Famagosta, and the battle of Lepanto, from the perspective of the Turks. They won the war. But, being the victor on the field doesn't mean that you're the victor in public memory. For example, the Vietnamese War was won by the Viet Cong, but how many books do you know of from that perspective? We always look at the Vietnam War from the perspective of the West and American point of view, even if the US was the loser in that war. Military defeat doesn't mean defeat in the real war: the war for public memory. So who is the subaltern in this case?

MD: In the case of Native Americans, in *Manituana* that is, how do you relate to this issue?

Wu: It's tricky there, because the Native Americans side with the Empire, with King George III – a powerful empire, an occupation army. They fought with this side, which for them was the right side to fight with because they had foreseen their fate under the new rule. George Washington had genocidal strategies against them. Scorched earth campaigns, like the Sullivan Expedition. There are the explicit orders that George Washington sent to Major Sullivan, and we insert these orders into the novel as a real document, and he explicitly ordered genocide. What was at stake was the possibility for white settlers to conquer Indian land – that was one of the reasons for the Revolution, actually. So, okay, in a way they are the subalterns, they are the vanishing Indians, the defeated, but they sided with the most powerful at that moment, because in 1775 the British Empire was the most powerful side. They weren't fighting with the underdog, they were fighting with the Empire. We intentionally chose such a tricky situation, a complex and entangled situation where distinctions are very subtle, because we didn't want to simply reverse the official versions of the American Revolution, and make the good villains and the villains good. That was too simplistic. We weren't interested in that. We wanted to show how complex the situation was. So it's multifaceted and there are several points of view. We always switch points of view. In *Altai* it's even more hypnotizing. The continual reversal of point of view. Who's the real subaltern there? Who's the real loser? It's not easy to answer that question.

MD: And in *Manituana*, it's complicated by the fact that the Iroquois federation is made up of six nations, one of which betrayed the others.

Wu: Right, the Oneida sort of betrayed the Mohawks. In fact, the Six Nations never found a consensus on the war. The Mohawk and Seneca sided with the Empire, the Onondaga and Tuscarora remained neutral, while most Oneida helped the rebels. The Continental Army put such pressure on the six nations that they effectively destroyed the federation. Siding with the rebels didn't do the Oneida much good. The Mohawks, in contrast, were rewarded by the Crown with lands north of the border, in Canada. They resettled there. At the end of *Manituana*, there were only about 300 Mohawks left in the entire continent. Now, there are about 40,000.

MD: Did you meet any of them?

GC: And how did they react to *Manituana*?

Wu: It's really too soon to know how they'll react to the novel since it's just been published in English. But when we described our project to the guy in charge of the Joseph Brant museum in Brantford, Ontario, he was very pleased. We sent him a copy of the book, but it's too soon...

I was at the Akwesasne Mohawk Reservation in 2001, but for completely different reasons. Before we got the idea of writing *Manituana*, because the Mohawks had to help us – and by us, I mean a group of activists heading towards Quebec City where there was the FTAA Summit. Many activists were converging for a counter-summit. There was a rally in Burlington, Vermont, and someone had the idea of crossing into Canada through the Mohawk reservation at Akwesasne. It was a symbolic gesture: continuing between the Mohawk struggle and the struggle against the FTAA. So there were some Mohawk activists who were supposed to help us cross the border into Canada, because half of Akwesasne is in the US and half is in Canada, and they can cross the border whenever they want. But this failed, because Canada had closed the border there. So I and some other Italian activists travelled east to cross the border. That was when I was in direct contact with Mohawk activists. I remember there was a guy with a megaphone and he kept saying, "Everything has to be very peaceful. Don't fuck with the rules of our community. Everything has to be very peaceful. My brother is in prison and

the FBI is constantly harassing us, so please don't do anything that can put us in jeopardy. Everything will be very peaceful." Three days later, he was in Quebec City throwing stones at the cops. He said, "I'm not on my land here, I don't need to be peaceful." It was very funny!

Then, after *Manituana*, two of us went on a pilgrimage to Brantford, to Kingston, where Molly Brant's tomb is, and to the big Mohawk reservation called Six Nations, and we wrote a travelogue that was published last year in Italian; it's called *Grand River*.

GC: I'm intrigued by the way that the novel is multi-layered and works on different layers. I'm interested, in terms of activism, in the idea of creating pleasure as well as giving a message.

Wu: Yes, our novels work on different levels. No, forget that: our novels *operate* on different levels. I don't want to be arrogant; it isn't up to us to say whether they work or not. It's true: many people read our novels as if they're just cloak-and-dagger historical fictions. But others see the level of political allegory. But most people read them on both levels, and constantly shift from one level to the other. I think you enjoy them more if you're aware of both levels. And they have to be readable and pleasurable. There's language experimentation, it's true, but always in the service of the story. We think that experimentation is good, but only if it serves the story, not if it's in and of itself. We're not interested in stylistic experiments in and of themselves. It's not our cup of tea. There are other writers who can do this. It's not our mission.

MD: Can you talk about *Manituana* in terms of political allegory relating to the War in Iraq.

Wu: Right, because we started from a journalistic metaphor that was used in the weeks prior to the shock and awe bombing that began the war in Iraq. This metaphor was "the Atlantic Ocean is widening," with reference to the difference of opinion between the US and Europe about the necessity of attacking Iraq, about the complicity of Saddam Hussein's regime in the attacks of 9/11, and about Saddam having hidden weapons of mass destruction. There was complete disagreement at the UN about this. And in Europe, most of the public, even the right wing, was against attacking Iraq. For instance, in Italy 50% of the people are explicitly fascist, but if I remember the figure correctly 92% of them were against the war in Iraq. This marked a big difference with what was going on in the US at the time. The same was true throughout Europe. And many newspaper articles kept talking about the widening gap between the EU and the US, one that was never so great as at that moment. So we began to reflect on the history of the relationship between the US and Europe. And of course the beginning of that relationship was with the American Revolution and the birth of the US as a separate country. At the beginning, the project was different. We wanted to write a novel set in 1876, exactly one century after the revolution. But one set in a parallel reality in which George Washington had been defeated. This involved reinventing a completely different reality, which was very difficult to handle, to the extent that we weren't able to imagine the changes that would be necessary. So we came independently to a conclusion: why imagine an alternate reality when the American Revolution itself contains so many different realities, depending on the different point of view that you choose? If you choose the point of view of Native Americans, the American Revolution is something totally different. It's something really far away from what one expects. So we decided to write a novel set in 1775, at the beginning of the revolution, and lasting the whole course of the war, until the Treaty of Paris, when the British Empire acknowledges the existence of the US as a separate country.

AD: And so having written the novel, what do you make of the discourse of American exceptionalism?

Wu: It's the birth of American exceptionalism; it's reflected in all the discourses and conversations that you find in the novel.

AD: But did your perspective on these questions change in the writing?

Wu: I don't know what we thought at the beginning. It's the curse of knowledge, that when you know something you don't remember how it was not to know it. But it's a book on American exceptionalism, seen from Europe. There are some conversations in the London section of the novel that are deeply allegorical of American exceptionalism, seen from a European perspective. And American exceptionalism is still there; Obama is an exceptionalist like Bush. Of course, the politics are different, but the exceptionalist assumptions are still there: the key role that America has to play on the world stage, etcetera. "We are the chosen ones" is the subtext underlying every discourse, whether it's Bush or Obama.

MD: I want to come back to the issue of the co-production of your work with your readers, and to expanding the network of the novels into a kind of social practice that is shared. I'd like you to discuss the relationship you have with your readers through different media, and the theoretical reflections you develop on this relationship through your interaction with Henry Jenkins - you wrote the introduction to the Italian translation of *Convergence Culture* - and your sense of the difference between mass culture and popular culture.

Wu: Okay, my brother is a Trekkie. He's got all the DVD boxes of every TV episode and movie. He even has a pin that you hit and it says "Beam me up, Scotty." I like Star Trek myself, but I'm not so obsessed. But he's one of the key members of the Star Trek use-net group in Italian. Anyway, I bumped into Jenkins' analysis Star Trek-related fan fiction, especially of the slash sub-genre - with the homosexual relationship between Kirk and Spock - years ago. And then I read about *Convergence Culture*, where he relates fan fiction to Pierre Lévy's theories of collective intelligence. In the 1990s, I had read all of Pierre Lévy's books, and one of the Wu Ming collective is the son of Pierre Lévy's first publisher in Italian, a small publisher called Synergion, based in Bologna, that went bankrupt after a few years, but thanks to their work I'd met Lévy in Bologna. That was the connection: Star Trek on the one side, and Pierre Lévy on the other. Wu Ming always moves in that middle terrain! I ordered *Convergence Culture* and, when I read it, found many confirmations of the things we've been doing since the Luther Blissett days. He described practices and communities that bore many resemblances with what the Luther Blissett Project had been and with what Wu Ming was, and especially the community of readers around us. He described communities of readers and fans, and described especially their creativity, the way they creatively and positively interact; they weren't passive consumers but kept modifying the text that they received. This bore many resemblances with what had always been happening around us.

So I wrote an email to Jenkins saying that I really enjoyed the book but that it ignored the context in Europe. Fan culture doesn't happen only in America. And I explained that the European counter-parts of these American fan cultures are more aware of themselves and more politically active. Because that's the difference between the two scenes. The distinction between the realm of popular culture and the realm of radical politics is not so sharp in Italy as in the US, it's more blurred. The Luther Blissett Project was both radical politics and popular culture. Jenkins was intrigued by this and wrote back saying that he'd read our material and would like to interview us. It's a very long and thorough interview that he published on his blog. Then we translated the interview and put it up on Carmilla, one of the most popular literary blogs in Italy. Then, an Italian publisher saw this and decided to publish a translation of Jenkins' book, and asked us to write a preface.

MD: So you can talk about the difference between the US approach to convergence culture and your own?

Wu: Yeah, he states that popular culture and mass culture are two different things. He says that "popular culture" is a much more complex concept than "mass culture," and I agree with his opinion. Popular culture doesn't necessarily have to be mass culture in order to be popular culture. Because now we are witnessing a personalization of the cultural flow, a partial demassification of the cultural flow, a crisis of the culture industry, and a downsizing of the mainstream. The mainstream is just another niche, it's just bigger than the others. So, in the 1960s you could talk about mass culture. Nowadays, there are some aspects that are mass culture, but there's a popular culture that's not necessarily mass. People listening to techno probably are not a big mass, but that's part of popular culture because their behavior is affected by the dynamics and practices that are diffused in the popular realm. This is a distinction that we make in our preface. Because in Italian these concepts are even more tricky since there's no such expression as folk culture in Italian. We often translate "popular culture" with *cultura popolare*, but that expression usually describes pre-industrial folk culture. Because *popolo* is the folk, or else has more political connotations, you hear the word and think of the French Revolution.

MD: But doesn't the popular culture still have a certain standardization built into it? For example, blogs on Wordpress are still built on a common template. Yes, people produce their own culture, but the template is the same.

Wu: Yeah, too few people tinker with the template. You can do this if you want. For example, for the *Altai* blog, we took a template and completely turned it upside down. It doesn't even look like it was before we intervened. But too few people challenge their place in the grid.

GC: But I think we're going to see a proliferation of templates and platforms. In fact, I think we already are seeing that. There was a moment within net politics and culture when you had Usenet and webpages, and it was pretty stable. Then, with social media, things proliferate. And I think we're only seeing the beginning of that. And all this has implications for content, because what you're noting is that the template does constrain the content and genre as well.

AD: I want to come back to the question of how your practice as a collective relates to the shifting character of the Italian Left.

Wu: "Shifting character" is a euphemism. I would describe it as lemming-like suicide. I probably would need an external point of view to tell if our practices have changed in reaction to the Italian Left. But I can be more specific and explain how our approach to myth making has changed after the defeat of the anti-capitalist movement in Genoa. We were deeply involved in that movement. We were seen kind of as organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense, which we refused, but it's not something that you choose. It's decided by other people. We made several framing mistakes, because we tried to use myths in order to rebuild the imaginary, the set of metaphors and images traditionally used by the anti-capitalist movement. We went backwards and completely skipped the 20th century, and made direct reference to pre-modern uprisings and rebellions. We metaphorically described the movement from Seattle to Genoa as though it were a peasant uprising. Which, in many part of the world, it was, in Brazil or in Chiapas, even in France with the *Confédération Paysanne*. A new kind of peasant riot,

against genetically modified organisms and such. When you see a French peasant destroying a McDonalds with a tractor, that's a peasant riot.

But, we exaggerated, we pushed the whole thing too far, and overused this metaphor of the peasants besieging the castle. Of course, there were summits like the G8 and the World Bank and the IMF meeting in Prague that were metaphorically speaking, the castle. Because the powerful of the planet met in a heavily garrisoned place, with many, many cops armed to the teeth surrounding the area, so that was the castle. But we weren't really besieging it, because that was only a formal manifestation of capitalist power. Real capitalist power is a flow of electrons, going from one stock exchange to another. It's completely immaterial. And so we weren't besieging the powers that be, because the powers that be are always somewhere else. We were besieging a ceremony, a symbolic moment. But at Genoa, we found out that we were the ones being besieged. We were exterminated, exactly like medieval peasants in their uprisings. Of course, there was only one dead, but there were hundreds and hundreds of people injured, people tortured in secret cells. And there are still people on trial, nine years later. For having broken some store windows, six demonstrators were convicted to thirteen years of prison two weeks ago. We're still suffering the consequences of that misconception. We weren't the besiegers. We found ourselves besieged. We had chosen the wrong metaphor.

We wrote a kind of edict. A long prose poem, which was entitled [From the Multitudes of Europe, Rising Up Against the Empire, and Marching Towards Genoa](#). We claimed the heritage of medieval uprisings. It was very successful as a text. It helped convince many people to go to Genoa. But from an ideological political point of view, it was completely wrong. Because we were evoking an Imaginary of defeat and bloody repression, and backwardness, in a way, because we were identifying with peasants whose mentality was still too narrow, actually, if we look at them from a more detached point of view, because they fell into every trap that was set against them by the powers that be. In *Q*, we show how Thomas Münzer made an incredible mistake because he went to the field battle, he wanted to have the final battle of the army of the just against the army of the unjust, the army of evil, and they all went to Frankenhausen and they were all exterminated by the cavalry and by the Landsknechts. Because they chose their enemies' ground, where they couldn't prevail in any way. And so we framed the whole campaign for going to Genoa in the wrong way. One of the consequences was that we were flabbergasted when bloody repression broke out in Genoa. Which was very naïve of us – we should have expected this!

MD: There were many signals before Genoa coming from the government, explicitly mentioning death as a possibility for demonstrators.

Wu: Yeah, but we chose to ignore them because we thought they were just trying to scare us. But it was already written in our manifesto, "We are the Hussites," and the Hussites were bloodily repressed in a field battle. "We are the Taborites," and they were repressed. All of these groups made the mistake of choosing one day and one place for a final confrontation. But there's no final confrontation because you are not besieging the powers that be. Because you can't corner power that way today.

GC: And it points to the contradictions of the anti-capitalist movement, which became a victim of its success. The movement needs to learn how to deal with success, which is difficult, because you don't know what the reaction to your success is going to be. We were just thrilled at how we were becoming more public, as opposed to thinking about what kind of responses would be provoked by our increasing success. This points to the shortcomings of not being able to note the way that success works against you.

Wu: Yes, the trouble is that you miss the moment, and then it's too late.

GC: But it is conceivable to think of this as a political tactic, to note the tactic of success and then think about the kind of repression that's going to follow.

AD: So are you writing a manifesto for Copenhagen?

Wu: No, absolutely not. No technified myths. Because we use the distinction made by the famous mythologist Károly Kerényi between genuine myth and technified myth. Genuine myth is spontaneous, while technified myth is engineered. For example, references to the Roman Empire made by the fascist dictatorship during the 1930s were a kind of technified myth. But so was our manifesto, which made an artificial myth for the movement. And that was the mistake.

AD: So what would you say is an example of an organic myth associated with the global justice movement?

Wu: Movements have to devise their own mythologies, with no separate groups trying to do it. Because the problem is specialization. At a certain moment, we were perceived as the specialists of myth making for the movement.

MD: Yes, and this is also because the press always wants to find a specialist, so when you want to talk about culture and the global movement, Wu Ming is the voice in Italy in the movement.

Wu: Right, and the problem arises with this specialization, because when you become a specialized group your myth doesn't arise from the movement but you take it from outside.

MD: My experience is with the impact of the Zapatistas, which became a kind of myth in Italy. And another example of this mythmaking is the experience of the white overalls [*tute bianche*], which become the disobedients [*disobbedienti*]. I participated in some actions in Rome when the group was still very open – around 1996. The idea was that you'd put on a white overall and do a direct action with a bunch of people. The group was still open at that point. But then it developed into an organization that had to have spokespeople in each city. The white overalls brought 50,000 people to Genoa. And it was incredible to see social centers from Rome that came from a completely different political and social orientation putting on white overalls and following along at Genoa, following this idea that we had to go and break down the castle walls. But it was really like Gaza – the army bombarded them.

Wu: Right. In fact, they tortured us, keeping hundreds of activists for three days in secret jail cell.

MD: Why don't we close with discussion of the Luther Blissett project and how all these people with different names collaborated in various ways.

AD: Yes, I'm interested in your refusal of the cult of the author.

GC: I also think that this is important to note because in the world of radical tech activism, when Web 2.0 started happening and people could become a celebrity to a small number of people, a number of radical tech activists – I call them 'fallen angels' – moved to Web 2.0 because they were seduced by the possibility of amassing a celebrity audience.

Wu: Your public image can become a burden, not only for you but also for your readers. When I'm recognized by someone, there's no mediating image. There's only one way you can look at me and say that I'm a member of Wu Ming: by having been present at one of our performances. I don't like the jargon of authenticity, but nevertheless I think this relation is more authentic. We interact in a more horizontal way, because we interact physically. The only way to interact with my image is to be in the same room with me. Also, I can walk into a shop in Bologna without being the famous writer entering a store. I can be a famous writer entering a store and nobody bothers me. Whereas, if Umberto Eco walks into a store in Bologna, everyone's whispering about him. But I can avoid that. Although I'm a bestselling author, my face is not everywhere, it's not detached from me.

But this was an evolution of Luther Blissett, of course, because in Luther Blissett no one ever appeared as himself or herself. You were always part of this open reputation that was constantly improved by the actions of many people, and these people were always invisible, literally and metaphorically speaking, because the most important thing was adding further to the reputation of this strange bandit, a Robin Hood of the information age, that was what Luther Blissett was for 5 years. So, when we started Wu Ming, we retained some elements of the Luther Blissett Project, one of which was not appearing in the media: no photos, no TV appearances. They keep trying, and we always say no. Of course, we can't prevent people taking photos of us during readings, and sometimes it happens, but mostly people respect our choice. But the most important thing is that I don't pose for photographs and I don't go on TV.

MD: And yet Luther Blissett had a face; what kind of face was that and why was it needed?

Wu: Yes, there were three great-great uncles of mine and a great-aunt, portraits from the 1930s, and we morphed them. It took a whole afternoon, but in the end there was a face. But the real Luther Blissett was black. At the beginning, the real Luther Blissett was baffled by us, but then in the end he accepted it and was enthusiastic about it.