

Performing the Postindustrial: The Limits of Radical History in Lowell, Massachusetts

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In the same time period and for many of the same reasons, Western cultures and places have become more self-consciously performative while the Western historical profession has become more self-consciously public. This essay discusses this double shift, using the former textile city of Lowell, Massachusetts, as a case study to explore what a heightened performativity and visibility have meant for the public presentation of radical histories. In settings where cultural performances of all kinds have become an essential part of the process of the branding and promoting of postindustrial places, even sharply critical views of capitalism are enlisted in the creation of rituals and narratives that support rather than question the growing inequalities and disjunctions that characterize postindustrial economies worldwide.

Performance and Postindustrialism

Culture, of course, has always been performative. And in recent decades, more and more scholars in many fields have adopted the concept of performance as a useful way of understanding human interactions and social processes.¹ But this new attention to performance is not merely a matter of scholars becoming more aware of something that has been there all along. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, long-standing patterns of cultural contact and change, migration and mutation have

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intensified exponentially. As Richard Schechner has put it, “Performance studies assumes that we are living in a postcolonial, performatized world where cultures are colliding, influencing and interfering with each other, and hybridizing at a very fast rate.”² Within these settings, there has been an accelerating tendency for places and people to put themselves on display, for a host of personal, political, economic, and professional reasons. New media such as video and the Internet, the rise of so-called identity politics, multiculturalist projects within nation-states, the growth of transnational and diasporic communities, and the rising importance of tourism at many levels of cultural identity formation and promotion have all contributed to a growing saturation of the world’s public discursive spaces with cultural imagery and display—that is to say, with a dizzying profusion of performances.

Large-scale economic restructuring in the first world has been a key factor in this proliferation. As the manufacturing of tangible products has ceased to be a driving economic force in the developed world, the production of services, knowledge, and symbolic goods has assumed a much greater importance. This has spurred the creation of entire new sectors whose outputs blur conventional definitions of culture and economics. In particular, the processes of place-making and place-marketing have become intricately connected with entertainment, education, and economic activity. Although the construction of any place is generally a contested affair that involves competing visions and voices, the newly dominant mode of place-making in much of the contemporary world is a highly professionalized and rationalized one. It may make use of vernacular and even oppositional groups and narratives, but these are very often subsumed into a larger process that is more likely to be controlled from planning and design departments than from neighborhoods.³ Increasingly, places and experiences are constructed as products in themselves, seeking to attract ever more mobile capital, workers, and visitors by making themselves “visitable,” by branding themselves using narrative design or other place-making strategies. Often, as in Lowell, these strategies are used as a way to create what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called “a second life as heritage” for places or people whose former economies have become obsolete. Equally, these types of cultural production may be used to insert a sense of localness and historical or cultural depth into what Marc Augé has referred to as “non-places”—the ubiquitous suburbs, superhighways, malls, airports, and other spaces of “supermodernity.”⁴

While many of these strategies are performative in the most obvious sense—for example, involving the performing arts, festivals, sports teams, and so on—there is a larger sense in which things like heritage trails, wayside historical markers, school field trips, museum exhibits, the designation of arts and historical districts, architectural references to past styles, the ubiquitous banners hung from lampposts and other similar types of display can also be considered fully performative. The purpose of all these strategies is to render landscapes communicative and

meaningful so that they can be experienced in embodied ways, whether the immediate goal is to make places marketable and competitive or to recapture and celebrate lost or subaltern histories. In many cases, as we will see with the example of Lowell, these very different kinds of goals overlap, with varying degrees of compatibility. Again, few of these strategies are truly new—humans have been memorializing and telling stories about places probably as long as the species has existed, and many cities, regions, and nations have long histories of self-promotion and competition. But the extent to which this is now being purposefully and professionally done, and the degree to which it has been absorbed into larger cultural economies, is a development unique to the present stage of capitalist development and society.⁵

These recent patterns of cultural production have in turn created a new class of cultural producers, and this is where the heightened performativity of culture intersects with the increased publicness of the historical profession. Over the past decade, the outlines of the emerging knowledge and service sectors have become much clearer. We can now see how they are stratified into top-level so-called new economy workers (the educated, mobile professionals who are able to keep ahead of the fast-moving edge of economic, technological, and cultural change in post-industrial capitalism); a somewhat uneven middle layer that includes many in the nonprofit and human service sectors, including educators and performing and visual artists; and a bottom layer of more poorly compensated service workers (for example, hotel and restaurant employees), many of whom are women and immigrants. It has also become clear that it is access to educational and cultural capital, rather than the more traditional financial capital, that separates these layers.⁶ Often, the work of those in the middle and lower layers of the new economy is utilized by planners, politicians, and others to attract people from the top echelons, those who Richard Florida has famously termed the “creative classes,” whose ideas are among the most sought-after commodities in the postindustrial economy.

Public historians are among these creative classes, and it is not entirely coincidental that public history developed into a professionalized field at the same time that postindustrial societies were becoming more performative in the ways detailed above. Professional and amateur historians have of course long been active in many public settings, but the field of public history per se emerged in the United States during the 1970s out of a nexus of three developments. First, there was the well-known (at least to historians) “job crisis” in academic history departments, which led many academically trained historians to look for employment elsewhere. A second factor was the leftist sensibility of many historians who came of age in the 1960s, and their desire to connect their work in meaningful ways to histories and causes linked with various progressive and social justice movements. While they have rarely been at the leading edge of radical public discourse, public historians have nonetheless consistently tended to lean to the left. Finally, these left-leaning knowledge workers

began searching for jobs in the public sector at a time when there was a great deal of public funding in many parts of the developed world for educational and cultural projects, including those that came under the rubric of “heritage.”

Many of these sources of funds have historically been linked with nationalist and multiculturalist efforts—for example, the celebratory fervor of the U.S. Bicentennial and the new multiculturalist nationalism of 1960s and 1970s Canada and Australia, which have their counterpart today in so-called Europeanization efforts and the extensive support for new cultural initiatives throughout the European Union. Other types of support came out of a concern for what was happening socially and economically in deindustrialized places, particularly cities, throughout the first world. Thus, in the United States, the drastic solutions of 1950s- and 1960s-style urban renewal gradually gave way to a wider embrace of historic landscapes and associations, linked with legislation like the Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (whose oversight and designation provisions have provided work for legions of public historians) and with countless new museums, heritage trails and areas, downtown revitalization projects, and other initiatives that provided work, directly or indirectly, for historical researchers, curators, museum educators, exhibit designers, restoration architects, and others in the history and preservation fields. Much of this abundant public funding has dried up since the 1980s, and the kinds of projects and settings within which many public historians ply their trade are now located more often within public-private projects. This shift toward a more entrepreneurial, market-oriented mode of cultural production has meant that public historians’ work has become much more fully integrated with the new kinds of products and services typically found in postindustrial economies—for example, with place-making, place-marketing, or rebranding campaigns, tourist experiences, film and television production, and so on.

Public History in Postindustrial Lowell

The former textile manufacturing city of Lowell, Massachusetts, offers an outstanding site for investigating the role of public history—including its more radical elements—within this interweaving of the performative and the postindustrial. Created as a model manufacturing community in the 1820s, Lowell was one of the earliest industrial centers in the United States. A century later, along with other textile cities in New England, it was among the first places to experience the shock of deindustrialization. In the 1960s and 1970s, Lowell became one of the first cities in the world to turn consciously to what is now termed “culture-led revitalization”—the broad repertoire of historic and arts districts, museums, waterfront redevelopment, sports facilities, public art, festivals, the adaptive reuse of old buildings, and related strategies that have become *de rigueur* for depressed cities and regions attempting to reposition themselves in the new economy. On the surface, Lowell’s reinvention of itself appears to present a remarkable example of bringing working-

class and ethnic histories into public space and discourse. A closer analysis, however, reveals that the city's multifaceted performance of its own history and culture troublingly replicates the new patterns of exclusion and inequality that are characteristic of postindustrial economies worldwide.

The notion of using Lowell's industrial and ethnic histories as a basis for revitalization first arose within the city's educational community in the 1960s.⁷ Fired by ideas of "alternative" classrooms, experiential learning, and ethnic celebration as a tool to boost self-esteem, progressive educators, most notably the then assistant superintendent of schools Patrick Mogan, began to argue that valorizing and reusing the past could be a way to help equip the city for the changing demands of the region's new economy and to attract attention, investment, and even visitors. Mogan's proposals were dismissed by many at first as inconsequential or outright crazy; few in depressed 1960s Lowell could envision tourists ever visiting such a place. But persistence, and the lack of other viable solutions to Lowell's dilemma, gradually allowed a broad coalition to form around the idea of creating an "urban cultural park" that could serve educational, celebratory, and commemorative purposes—what one consultant called a "new educational/cultural/economic animal" unlike conventional historical or educational ventures.⁸ This new creature, it was hoped, could ultimately be a catalyst for reversing first the image and then the actuality of decline. Long-standing fractures along ethnic and class lines had stood in the way of previous attempts at renewal, but these were overcome to a very large extent after the U.S. senator and presidential aspirant Paul Tsongas, a native of Lowell, became a proponent of the plan. Tsongas and other well-placed political supporters were able to bring many local landowners, business people, and bankers on board, creating a tight-knit, enduring network still known locally as the "Lowell delivery system" that has consistently been able to mobilize funding and other resources for the city's ongoing redevelopment. This public-private collaboration has been a hallmark of Lowell's revitalization and of postindustrial redevelopment in general.⁹

From its beginnings, Lowell's revitalization has involved making the city more performative in the sense that I have discussed above. Mogan's vision was for Lowell to become an "educative city" or a "learning laboratory" in which students, visitors, and residents alike could learn about industrial and immigrant history not merely by walking through a museum exhibit but through a more holistic experience—a visit to a city whose present-day culture was, in the words of one public historian, "an artifact of the industrialization process."¹⁰ In this vision, the city itself *was* an exhibit. This notion was reflected in a mantra that guided early planning at Lowell National Historical Park (NHP) and that is occasionally still heard today: "The park is the city and the city is the park." This heightened performativity—the self-conscious display of what had previously been framed as ordinary reality—included many components. Early efforts frequently involved educators who began

having their students study and document Lowell's past, including one of my interviewees who described the influence of Mogan when she was searching for ways to improve her students' writing skills:

And I thought, "Well, what am I going to have them write on?" And I had been listening to [Pat Mogan], and so I decided that they were all going to write on the history of Lowell. . . . So they started out, I had them do that, and it was at the time when the whole idea of the urban national park was starting. . . . This is early to mid-1970s. And I thought, "You know, they've got to get a better feel for this." So somehow or another I convinced [the high school principal] to, you know, why couldn't I just take some of these kids out during the class period? All I wanted to do was to walk them around downtown and look up, okay? ¹¹

"Just walking around and looking up" was one small step in a much longer process of the collection, designation, preservation, and reshaping of many elements of Lowell's built environment and cultural landscapes. Existing but parochial ethnic celebrations have very often been gathered under the umbrella of citywide folk festivals as the production of culture and heritage has become more institutionalized and marketed in the "new Lowell." Tremendous effort has been put into creating historic districts (notably downtown) and funneling money toward the renovation of former textile mills, commercial buildings, and other structures. The five and a half miles of canals that once powered the mills have become tour routes; the recreational development of the waterfront along the canals and the Merrimack and Concord Rivers continues to be an important focus for city planning in Lowell, as well as in many other cities. Myriad public artworks and wayside historical plaques contribute to the creation of a narrative thread linking the cityscape to the stories of industrial innovation, decline, and rebuilding, and to the ongoing saga of immigration, assimilation, and cultural diversity in a city that continues to be home to many immigrants. Indoor and outdoor performing arts series, a well-known industrial history center for K–12 education, and a number of museums and art galleries all contribute to the elaboration of Lowell's performative public spaces. References to the past in these spaces help to stamp the city with a memorable and narrativized identity, while supporting its present-day image as a revitalized and culturally vibrant place to live, work, and visit. The city's famous early workforce of "mill girls"—ironically the source of much wonder and something of a tourist attraction in their own right in the early nineteenth century—has become virtually a brand within a brand, known to people who have never visited the city itself.

The mill girls have become so well known largely through the interpretive work of the Lowell National Historical Park. The park was created as part of an expansionist effort in the National Park Service (NPS), which began in the early 1960s and which was designed to reach urban, less-affluent audiences and to incorporate new kinds of histories into the national park system.¹² The creation of many

new parks in this period was prompted by widespread concern about deindustrialization and poverty in gutted inner cities, and spurred in part by a historiographical shift toward what was then known as the “new social history,” the “roots” phenomenon, the discovery of vernacular histories by countless people and groups, and related developments. The NPS’s expansive moment was an opportunity on which Mogan and his allies in Lowell were quick to capitalize. NPS decision-makers were initially lukewarm toward the idea of a national park in Lowell, arguing that too much of its nineteenth-century industrial infrastructure had been lost and that aside from its early “golden age” of innovation and development, its history essentially duplicated that of any American industrial city. A well-orchestrated planning and lobbying effort eventually carried the day, however, and the park’s enabling legislation was passed in 1978. When the first visitor center opened its doors late that year, many in Lowell were still confused by the rhetoric of “the park is the city and the city is the park.” Where exactly would the national park *be*? The notion of a national park whose mission was in some sense to make the entire city—or at least its designated historical sections—more communicative, visitable, and performative was mysterious to many observers. In the nearly three decades since the park was created, the concept has become much clearer, not only because of the addition of many museum, education, performance, and interpretive facilities in the city’s landscape but also because the Lowell model of a decentralized partnership park has subsequently become much more common in such developments as heritage areas, regional branding and tourism campaigns, heritage and waterfront trails, and similar projects. At the forefront of this movement into larger and more professionally designed units of cultural display, Lowell was being heralded as “*the* relevant precedent emulated by gritty cities worldwide” barely a decade after the national park was inaugurated.¹³

In much the same way as the city broke new ground in culture-led redevelopment, Lowell NHP was at the cutting edge of public historical display, bringing what were then quite innovative—and are still quite radical—interpretations of women’s, immigrants’, and labor history into public exhibit space and experimenting in new ways with what Michael Frisch has famously labeled “shared authority.”¹⁴ The park’s interpretive staff has been keenly aware of the visibility and often groundbreaking character of their work. One early park planner and historian told me, “I think most of us young people on the staff . . . thought of ourselves as a little subversive. You know, we wanted to make this a place where we could showcase the history of the ‘common man,’ and not do one of those sort of old-fashioned celebratory majoritarian kinds of stories.” Another recalled, “One day we were just standing around and we all realized, ‘Oh, my God, there’s no road map here. We’re doing something that people will look back on some day.’ I mean, it was very conscious that we were doing something that was different, was going to set new rules. And we were aware of that.” Lowell NHP retains an iconic status for many in the

public history field. As a younger park employee who is a PhD historian noted, “In my universe, both national and international, of industrial history and public history of technology, Lowell looms very large on the horizon. . . . Everybody I studied in graduate school or studied *with*, had a hand in this place.”

I undertook two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Lowell between 2001 and 2003, focusing on the question of where public historians’ work fit within the overall project of retrofitting an old industrial city for a postindustrial economy. My primary informants were the staff in the interpretive division of the Lowell NHP, and my theoretical framework was a performative one. That is, I wanted to investigate these professional knowledge workers not only as producers of narratives, images, and settings through which the new Lowell was being enacted but also as participants, performers, in that enactment. I attended tours and festivals, spent time in exhibits, observed exhibit planning meetings and school workshops, and conducted interviews with people in and around Lowell’s public history realm.

Like many visitors to Lowell, I was at first deeply impressed by the park’s boldly critical interpretations of industrial and labor history. The Lowell NHP presents industrial capitalism as a contested, uneven, and often exploitative economic system whose effects—including the deindustrialization that left Lowell in such economic distress by the 1960s—can and should be rigorously questioned rather than uncritically celebrated. Beginning with the park’s introductory slide show and continuing through exhibits and ranger-led tours, the park’s foundational narrative of the mill girls is told as a tale of gradual disenchantment, labor activism, and eventual replacement of the early native-born workforce with immigrants who were willing to work for lower wages. A popular series of video kiosks in the park’s main museum features former textile workers talking about their jobs in ways that deepen and complicate visitors’ understandings of the experience of industrial labor. Another video installation presents the 1912 textile strike from the perspectives of a mill owner, a pair of labor organizers, and a member of the union rank and file. The less critical elements of park interpretation—for example, a triumphal ending to the permanent exhibit, which painted a prematurely rosy picture of the city’s revitalization in the early 1990s—have gradually been replaced by more thoughtful, contextualized displays. At many turns, the influence of progressive public historians can be felt. Particularly when compared with other industrial history museums, which continue to struggle with their inherent tension between celebrating industrial achievement and chronicling its demise in the United States, the Lowell NHP puts on display a remarkably critical view of industrial capitalism. This perspective is grounded in rigorous scholarship and inflected by a left-of-center (sometimes considerably left-of-center) political sensibility that resists the ascendant neoliberal faith in market-based solutions as the answer to most of humanity’s ills.

Taken purely as a text, then, or even as a script for performance, the inter-

pretive productions at the Lowell NHP appear to be—and are often taken as—a model for provocative public history and an oasis of critical thought in the midst of a rapidly developing market-oriented cultural economy. But when I looked more broadly at the park as a site of cultural performance—that is, when I considered not only the messages that were being produced but also the larger social contexts within which they were being displayed and received—a less hopeful picture emerged. For all its undeniable achievement in reinventing itself, the new Lowell replicates many of the characteristics of global capitalism as a whole and of postindustrial economies in particular. Its success in promoting itself as a diverse, culturally vibrant, architecturally interesting small city, coupled with its location at the edge of the superheated Greater Boston real estate market, have made Lowell a very expensive place in which to live.¹⁵ New development emphasizes market-rate far more than low- or middle-income housing, contributing to familiar patterns of gentrification and an increasing spatial and social separation between haves and have-nots. While the city's overall level of prosperity has risen strikingly in recent years, this reflects its ability to attract those from the upper end of the new economy much more than any notable level of success in overcoming the problems of persistent poverty that remain for many residents and neighborhoods. And as in many places that turn to tourism and cultural display as economic development strategies, those whose cultures and histories are being represented and marketed are often notably absent from the forums in which festivals, exhibits, and similar projects are being planned and created. The new Lowell, then, is emerging as a bifurcated and unequal place, reflecting the global realities that wealth and opportunity are becoming increasingly concentrated within a smaller and smaller proportion of the population. A performative analysis of the role of public history and the Lowell NHP within the city's revitalization reveals that far from contributing to any collective questioning of these postindustrial realities, even the most radical historical interpretations at the park serve to support the underlying logic of economic restructuring in subtle but powerful ways. I will conclude by surveying some of these.

Audiences, Performers, Absences

Over the course of my two years of fieldwork, I conducted brief exit interviews with more than three hundred national park visitors to try to get a sense of who was drawn to the park and what they experienced there. This data provides some important insights into what I came to think of as “rituals of reconnection” taking place at the park and in Lowell as a whole. The park's visitors were almost exclusively white-collar professionals; two-thirds worked in managerial or professional jobs, many of them in the education, information, scientific, health, or social service sectors—important drivers of the new economy. While they were comfortably located within that economy, there were also signs that their own (or their families')

shift into the middle classes had been comparatively recent. Many were teachers, engineers, or nurses—traditionally gateway professions by which first-generation college attendees move into the professional world. In this, they were strikingly similar to public historians themselves, whose family backgrounds revealed the same two- or three-generation shift from manual to white-collar labor. When I asked visitors how they felt their own work lives compared with those of their forebears, 75 percent mentioned change or difference; some noted extreme difference, with comments like, “a different planet,” “centuries apart,” or “a totally different world.” Yet this generational change also brought with it some sense of disconnection or loss for many visitors. A ranger told me a story of encountering a weeping visitor on the second floor of the Boott Cotton Mills Museum. Having passed through the noisy weave room exhibit on the second floor, in which working looms give some sense of the incessant racket of the shop floor, the visitor had a painful epiphany:

[She was] talking about her grandmother [who] had worked in a mill and she used to describe it, but you know, as a kid, she kind of listened to it but didn't really, she never really understood what her grandmother went through. She gets up to the second floor of the museum and there's tears coming down her cheeks. And you know, she was in her fifties, and she said, “*Now I know what she meant.* And now she's gone, and I can't ask her.”

The same sense of disconnection—and the same use of Lowell's historic landscape as an attempt to bridge it symbolically—emerged from many of my interviews with national park staff, including one man who told me:

To me, thinking back, [coming to work in Lowell] was connecting with the farm-to-factory story, what my family had gone through and what they carried with them from their origins and culture into the town, and how so little of that seems to have gotten passed down as things disbanded from generation to generation, especially with the mass media that's come up. But . . . with education, and the point of education is *not* to work in a factory, *not* to work on a farm, and to work behind a desk and to—I guess, the white-collar professional middle-class existence was the goal that I had and my family had. And I lived that dream! [laughs] The National Park Service—perfect middle-class bureaucrat existence!

For both visitors and employees, then, the performance that is being enacted at the Lowell NHP is a ritualized reconciliation of the tensions between past and present. Furthermore, the people seeking these rituals of reconnection do so in a time and place at which their families' recently achieved middle-class status is by no means stable or secure. The developing postindustrial economy puts tremendous new pressures on the middle classes, and those without the educational capital to move

up (or keep up), or the desire to participate wholeheartedly in corporate culture, frequently find themselves maneuvering on shaky ground. Visiting or working in a place like Lowell may be one way to slot themselves somewhat safely into a narrative of continued development and progress, while at the same time paying homage to the sacrifices and experiences of lost working-class or ethnic forebears.

These white-collar visitors are of course by no means the only audience for cultural performances in Lowell. Yet they do form the bulk of the park's mainstream visitation, and their presence suggests strongly that despite the considerable oppositional potential of the park's intended messages, those messages are being received and used in ways that bolster, rather than question, a teleological narrative in which the postindustrial has emerged largely unproblematically from the industrial. Park visitors do not seem to include former industrial laborers, union organizers, or anti-globalization activists; rather, they are drawn from a comparatively narrow slice of postindustrial demography. Another key audience at the park, the substantial numbers of schoolchildren who visit it on field trips to the Tsongas Industrial History Center, does include a much wider socioeconomic range, among them the children of people at the lower stratum of the new economy.¹⁶ A great limitation of museum research is still that we have little real data showing what people actually do over the long term with the knowledge they encounter in museums, so a good deal of our analysis of museums' effects is highly speculative. An optimistic view of the Tsongas Center is that these young visitors may be imbibing ideas—including the park's critical interpretations of capitalism, labor, and technology—that may inform more critical thinking on their own part as they grow up. But my observation of a number of Tsongas Center workshops showed signs that the same underlying logic—the creation of a postindustrial place—is at work here as well, undercutting views that might pose more of a challenge to received ideas about the way our economy works.

I was particularly intrigued by the “Workers on the Line” workshop, in which students simulate assembly-line labor. Workshop leaders speed up the assembly line to a pace that eventually becomes impossible for the students to maintain, at which point things fall apart in chaos and the group is reconvened in a “Teenaged Workers of the World” union meeting hall. When I first asked a Tsongas Center employee about “Workers on the Line,” she outlined the program for me, describing the assembly-line scenario and the different ways that students react to the demands placed on them. When she told me about the union meeting, I said it sounded as though they were training a new generation of labor activists. “Oh, no,” she reassured me. “We’re just trying to show them how it used to be.”

On another day, I spoke with a school chaperone who turned out to be both a parent of a student in the group and the principal of the school from which the class had come. When I asked him how he thought the workshop had gone, he replied,

“Well, I think they got the message.” I asked what message he meant, and he said, “Just what things were really like back then. I don’t think any of these kids have any idea what this kind of work was like. I worked in a shoe factory when I was a teenager, so I know firsthand how bad it could be. It wasn’t nearly as bad as the conditions in those old mills, but it was bad enough.” And he concluded, “That’s what prompted *me* to get an education, I can tell you!” Now ensconced in the professional classes via the standard mechanism for socioeconomic mobility, a college education, this man could join unquestioningly with Lowell’s interpreters and educators to help his own young charges similarly locate themselves at the privileged edge of the story and the socioeconomic continuum. Industrial labor, in Lowell’s performative landscape, is consistently experienced as either in the past or at a safe distance from audiences’ own present-day lives, rather than as something to be engaged with as a facet of the contemporary world in which we all live.

Occasionally, however, I did see indications that some among the park’s visitors were interested in exploring in more critical ways the many questions raised by Lowell’s history and in creating openings for more politicized and perhaps active connections with “real-life” questions connected to that history. Some of the people I surveyed commented on similarities between their own work and the kind of labor done in factories. A few of these visitors actually worked on assembly lines (mostly in the high technology industry), but most were white-collar workers who drew various comparisons between their work lives and those of factory workers. Several remarked that working hours were becoming longer again, reversing the historical trend over the past century and a half. Others noted similarities between the effects of past and present technological innovation on workers, commenting that their own work was still dependent on machines. A few commented on labor-management relationships, saying they felt lower-level workers were still not adequately respected or compensated and that corporations’ overriding focus on profit had remained the same over time. I was struck by the fact that the more critical labor-oriented comments often came from women working in traditionally female jobs like teaching and nursing—two thoroughly unionized and highly politicized areas of the service sector in which issues of gender, power, and unequal access to resources are regularly acted out. These visitors clearly saw their own working lives as part of a continuum that included the stories told at Lowell, and they were very ready to engage with what they saw at the national park in critical and present-oriented ways. As I was talking with a ranger outside the Boott Mill theater one afternoon, a pair of women visitors came out after viewing the slide show. One noted approvingly that the show had dealt with the income disparities between workers and owners in the past, but suggested that the script should be updated to reflect the fact that these gaps had widened greatly in recent decades. As the visitors moved off through the exhibit, the ranger—herself a former teacher—said to me, “She’s a really interesting woman—a teacher. We were talking a lot earlier.” I was starting to describe

my developing thesis that teachers were among the more radical users of Lowell's messages when, as if on cue, the woman came back to say, "You know, I was just wondering—do *you* people have a union?" The ranger admitted that Lowell's rangers, as most at national parks, were not unionized and that in fact some park staff had recently been asking themselves what kind of leverage they might be able to exert to save certain health benefits likely to be cut in the tightened budget of the next fiscal year.

These and other small incidents and exchanges suggest to me that there is some potential for Lowell's cultural performances to function in a broader range of ways. Yet I encountered these individual moments only in isolation, in visitors' conversations or occasional informal encounters with a ranger rather than in concert with any wider discussions or interpretive offerings. The park's rituals of reconnection are designed to bridge personal distances—between visitors' and public historians' own family pasts and personal presents—while diverting attention from the social distances between these postindustrial workers and people less prosperously situated in the present day. This ritual function connects visitors to their own individual pasts while masking their connections to present-day disparities, with the result that the critical or activist potential of the Lowell NHP goes largely unrealized. Rosalyn Deutsche laments the co-optation of public art into the postindustrial cultural economy, arguing that "the real social function of the new public art [is] to present as natural the conditions of the late-capitalist city into which it hopes to integrate us."¹⁷ Public history in Lowell fulfills precisely the same naturalizing function, despite the fact that many of the professional public historians at the park have been trained to question exactly such teleological narratives.

Over the more than three decades of Lowell's culture-led revitalization, heroic efforts have been made to create and sustain certain kinds of projects—a downtown luxury hotel, an arena named in memory of Paul Tsongas, the redevelopment of the Boott Mill complex that is the site of the national park's main exhibit facility. Other projects and partnerships have fallen by the wayside or have never really coalesced, often for reasons that those involved cannot fully explain. Neighborhood organizations, antipoverty groups, and low-income housing advocates were all around the table during the initial planning phases of the overall renewal effort, but most people associated with these issues dropped out relatively early in the process. A partnership with organized labor was envisioned as a key element of the plan well into the 1980s, but that collaboration, too, fell by the wayside. In one of the most telling ironies of the new Lowell, a dispute over brick—that quintessential symbol of industrial cities—dealt a final blow to the disintegrating relationship. During the renovation of a former textile corporation boardinghouse block as a home for labor union offices and a meeting hall along with the park's "Working People" exhibit and the university's local history collection, an oversight by a contractor and some trading of favors typical of Lowell's cronyish insider network led

to the hiring of nonunion masons to lay brick on the exterior of the building. A local reporter seized on the story and publicized it, making it difficult for the unions to defend their continued involvement in the project. National Park Service staff and others with a long-standing stake in Lowell's performative infrastructure frequently express the wish that more people from the city's many new immigrant communities could be more involved in shaping the ongoing redevelopment. But the newer immigrants are still much more often to be found playing the role of colorful ethnic others on the city's various stages rather than as professional culture brokers or decision makers around the meeting tables where the real business of the city's revitalization is hammered out.¹⁸

These absences are revealing. Taken together with a performative analysis of the encounters that take place in Lowell's commemorative and interpretive spaces, they make it clear that the kinds of presences that do endure and the experiences that these spaces support are those that reinforce, on a fundamental level, the continuing creation of Lowell as a postindustrial place. The city's performative landscape works against any direct questioning of the desirability of what that creation entails and does not propose—as public historians in Lowell have done so compellingly in their depiction of the processes of industrialization—any alternative visions for what this postindustrial city and other places like it might become.

Notes

1. The origins of the academic field of performance studies are generally located in J. L. Austin's analysis of the performativity of language in 1955 (*How to Do Things with Words*) and Erving Goffman's well-known assertion that "life itself is a dramatically enacted thing" (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [New York: Anchor, 1959], 72). More recently, scholars have explored the performative qualities of many aspects of social life—for example, Judith Butler has examined the performativity of gender (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [London: Routledge, 1999] and *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* [New York: Routledge, 1997])—while a substantial literature has emerged at the nexus of anthropology, folklore, and aesthetics, incorporating work by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Richard Schechner, Victor Turner, and others on the broad category that Milton Singer (*When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* [New York: Praeger, 1972]) dubbed "cultural performances," or episodes of heightened collective reflexivity and display that both reveal and shape social processes at a very deep level.
2. Richard Schechner, "Performance Studies in/for the 21st Century," *Anthropology and Humanism* 26 (2002): 160. In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), Arjun Appadurai advanced the notion of new kinds of cultural "scapes"—for example, ethnoscares and technoscares—that characterize global culture and shape the processes of identity formation and expression. James Clifford makes a similar argument in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
3. For some foundational examples of the growing critical literature on these processes, see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage, 1990); Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art*

- and *Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (London: Verso, 1996); and Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
4. On visitability, see Bella Dicks, *Culture on Display: The Production of Contemporary Visitability* (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2003). On branding, see Al Ries and Laura Ries, *The Origin of Brands: Discover the Natural Laws of Product Innovation and Business Survival* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2004); and James Twichell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004). On place-making, see Lynda H. Schneekloth and Robert G. Shibley, *Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities* (New York: Wiley, 1995); and the Project for Public Spaces, *How to Turn a Place Around: A Handbook for Creating Successful Public Spaces* (New York: Project for Public Spaces, 2000). Narrative design is a technique pioneered by Dennis Frenchman; see his “Narrative Places and the New Practice of Urban Design,” in *Imaging the City: Continuing Struggles and New Directions*, ed. Lawrence Vale and Sam Bass Warner (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 2001), 257–82. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s analysis of heritage is found in part 2 of her *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For Marc Augé’s discussion of “non-places,” see *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).
 5. One of the earliest and most influential statements on this development is Frederic Jameson’s well-known article “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 144 (1984): 53–92.
 6. Pierre Bourdieu (particularly in *Distinction: A New Critique of the Judgment of Taste* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984]) has analyzed these emerging social formations, including the appearance of a new class of service workers he termed the “new petite bourgeoisie.” Also see John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990), particularly chapter 5, for a discussion of these new culture-related classes as they relate to tourism, one of the most salient aspects of the postindustrial new economy for the purposes of this essay.
 7. For a detailed analysis of the genesis of Lowell’s culture-led redevelopment, see Loretta Anne Ryan, “Lowell in Transition: The Uses of History in Urban Change” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1987).
 8. *Ibid.*, 301.
 9. For more on the creation and marketing of postindustrial cities, see Stephen Ward, *Selling Places: The Marketing and Promotion of Towns and Cities, 1850–2000* (New York: Routledge, 1998), particularly part 5. Sharon Zukin meticulously analyzes the mechanisms by which public-private partnerships work in her study of the recreation of New York’s Soho district as a center of cultural production and consumption; see her *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
 10. Robert Weible, *The Continuing Revolution: A History of Lowell, Massachusetts* (Lowell, MA: Lowell Historical Society, 1991).
 11. Following ethnographic convention, I do not identify my interviewees by name except where they are unique or identifiable public figures. As an anthropologist, I am more concerned with discovering social patterns, and hence I use quoted material from my field research when it illuminates those patterns, rather than standing as the unique opinions of individuals.

12. See Harpers Ferry Center, *The National Parks: Shaping the System* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 2005).
13. Allen Freeman, "Lessons from Lowell," *Historic Preservation*, November-December 1990, 32.
14. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).
15. The National Low Income Housing Coalition reported that in 2005, Lowell was the third most expensive housing market in Massachusetts, which was in turn the fourth most expensive (after Washington, DC, Hawaii, and California) in the United States. For detailed data, see National Low Income Housing Coalition, *Out of Reach 2005* (Washington, DC: National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2005), available at www.nlihc.org/oor2005. While affordable housing was a notable component of some of the initial adaptive reuse of Lowell's textile mills, legislative changes since the Reagan era—what Mike Wallace terms the preservation movement's shift "toward its real estate right and away from its populist left"—have made it more expedient and necessary for preservationists to forge alliances with development interests than with housing advocates. See Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 205.
16. The Tsongas Industrial History Center is a partnership of the Lowell National Historical Park and the Graduate School of Education at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell. During the period of my fieldwork, the Tsongas Center hosted approximately sixty thousand schoolchildren each year, in addition to providing teacher training and other activities.
17. Deutsche, *Evictions*, 66.
18. The issues of ethnicity, localness, and tradition in Lowell offer a separate field of analysis, which I have written about elsewhere: see my "Serving Up Culture: Heritage and its Discontents at an Industrial History Site," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 11 (2005): 415–31; and *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), chap. 7.