

# Serving Up Culture: Heritage and its Discontents at an Industrial History Site

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*Arguing that heritage sites offer a particularly porous boundary between anthropologists and the discursive and social worlds of their informants, this article suggests that a public interest approach to research at such sites has the potential to capitalise on that porosity in ways that may be able to address anthropology's traditional concerns with social inequality. The article uses a case study of a folk-life demonstration at a US industrial heritage site to show how anthropological analysis might move beyond simply documenting patterns of exclusion and exoticism. By participating more actively in forums already populated by heritage professionals, convening new and more inclusive meeting grounds for discussion of heritage issues, and producing broader ethnographic studies of heritage sites, anthropologists can extend their analyses into more public and activist arenas, ultimately reframing the contemporary anthropological encounter as it occurs within social spaces created by heritage discourse.*

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Over the past two decades, often without intending or realising it, anthropologists and other scholars interested in heritage have manoeuvred against a particularly porous boundary between scholarship and practice, and between their own work and that of the people they are studying. In investigating museums, nationalist cultural projects, tourist productions and landscapes, and historic sites, scholars enter a world that abuts their own in many ways. Because we are engaged in defining and debating precisely the same cultural materials as our informants, we become de facto participants, for good or ill, in the social arenas and discursive fields we study. In Charles Briggs's terminology, our own 'meta-discursive' practices—our discourses about discourse—very often place

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us in a relationship with other social actors in the fields of knowledge production and interpretation, of cultural definition, contestation, and display.<sup>1</sup>

Such participation contains the potential for both problems and opportunities. Thus far, however, far more critical attention has been paid to the possible dangers of the scholarly study of heritage than to the openings it presents for an expanded engagement in the public sphere. From the perspective of anthropologists, this emphasis on caution is not difficult to understand. Sensitive to the discipline's historical links with imperialist projects, and rightly cautious of the ways in which scholarly authority may affect public perceptions of other groups or expressions, anthropologists and their critics alike have expressed concern over the effect of scholarship's deconstructive approach to heritage, particularly as it arises from the 'invention of tradition' literature that emphasises the constructed, syncretic, strategic nature of cultural forms often promoted by their producers as timeless and authentic. As James Clifford notes, 'In normalizing impurity, we have questioned purist regimes of "authenticity". But have we always been attentive enough to the ways in which articulations of authenticity are embedded in specific historical or political situations?'<sup>2</sup> As Briggs points out, in addition to extending scholarly control over the discourses of others, anthropological deconstructions of 'invented traditions' and other cultural productions may actually add to the real-life obstacles faced by subordinated groups, who often choose to mobilise a 'strategic essentialism' as a political tool.

These concerns have prompted a greater reflexivity among many who study heritage productions. But as yet there has been little sustained effort to move beyond critique or awareness and towards the task of theorising the complex relationship between civic-minded scholars and heritage practitioners—the curators, museum educators, tour guides, exhibit designers, and others who are both colleagues and subjects for those of us investigating the heritage field. What is taking place across that porous boundary? Is there a way to structure the encounter so that practitioners can draw on the strengths of academic inquiry—primarily the attention paid in recent decades to unequal relationships of power and the mechanisms by which they are created and sustained—without the scholarly perspective dissolving into pure advocacy? How might a public interest approach play a role in heritage studies that are rigorously critical yet responsive to the real-life ramifications of all actions taken within the fields of heritage discourse we have entered? This paper, along with others in this issue, attempts to contribute to such a theorising, by examining a folk-life presentation observed during dissertation fieldwork in the former industrial city of Lowell, Massachusetts. One of the earliest American places to experience the shock of de-industrialisation, Lowell was also among the first to invest heavily in now-widespread revitalisation techniques based on history, heritage, culture, and tourism. The resulting network of heritage institutions and practitioners in the city provides an exceptionally dense and reflexive environment for research into the politics and poetics of heritage discourse, where questions such as those posed above can usefully be considered. The paper begins by describing and analysing the folk-life event, 'Feasting on Lowell', focusing on the factors that made it an unsatisfying and frustrating occasion for nearly all involved, and one which troublingly reproduced conventional exoticising patterns of cultural display

despite the well-meaning attempts of its producers and performers. It then considers some possible ways in which such an analysis might be extended into more public and activist arenas, with an eye to reframing the contemporary anthropological encounter as it occurs within social spaces created by heritage discourse.

### **Feasting on Lowell**

Lowell is a city of approximately 100,000 people, 25 miles north-west of Boston. Created in the 1820s as a planned manufacturing community, it was an important textile-producing centre for a century, until its major corporations moved elsewhere in search of lower production costs. After the failure of various renewal proposals, a broad coalition of political, business, and cultural leaders eventually came together around the then-novel idea of using the city's industrial and immigrant history as the basis for economic and social revitalisation.<sup>3</sup> The centrepiece of this project was an innovative national park created in 1978. The park was designed to be not only the key interpreter of Lowell's history but also the catalyst for a wide variety of publicly- and privately funded projects. As well as museum exhibits and tours provided by the national park itself, these projects have included extensive landscape and architectural improvements within a 55 ha historic preservation district, public performances and festivals, public art installations, an industrial history education centre, sports facilities and waterfront parks. Set against a backdrop of a regional shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy and continuing cycles of migration that have seen Lowell become the second-largest Cambodian community in the USA and the home of many thousands of Latino, African, and Brazilian immigrants over the past two decades, Lowell's heritage revitalisation project has contributed significantly to the creation of an improved image for this once-reviled city. Making a much more successful transition into post-industrialism than many comparable places in the region, Lowell now boasts a physically well-preserved and cared-for 19th-century built environment, a diversifying economic base with many 'new economy' businesses, a growing reputation as an attractive small urban setting, and—less positively—many of the characteristics of emerging post-industrial places, notably a widening gap between rich and poor residents.

My fieldwork was conducted in Lowell's heritage realm between 2000 and 2002. The specific focus was on those who worked in the interpretive division of Lowell National Historical Park (NHP). I was interested in the extent to which these academically trained, generally left-leaning professional knowledge workers were able to bring critical perspectives into the public spaces of the new information- and service-based society which they were charged with interpreting. In particular, I studied sites of cultural production where public historians were attempting to make statements about the contemporary city and its relationship to growing economic globalisation and global flows of refugees and migrants. One such site was the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center, named after the visionary Lowell educator who first proposed the idea of a heritage-based revitalisation strategy in the late 1960s. Housed in a former textile corporation boarding-house, the Mogan Center is part of a cluster of buildings and green spaces



**Figure 1** The Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center at Lowell National Historical Park.

that constitute the centre of gravity of the dispersed and far-flung national park (see Figure 1).

The renovation of the boarding-house block and the adjacent performing arts space at Boardinghouse Park was one of the proudest achievements of the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, a temporary federal agency created along with the park to act as a development arm for the multifaceted revitalisation project. Skilfully making use of cultural activity to further agendas driven largely by economic concerns, the commission saw the Mogan Center and Boardinghouse Park as ways to draw people and activity into the empty downtown area which was the focus of its redevelopment efforts. The creation of the Mogan Center also reflected the insistence of local park supporters that the national park should not simply tell a story of long-ago technological and economic innovation, but should also forge interpretive and social connections with the immigrant populations who comprised a majority of the city's residents for most of its history. When the national park was created in the late 1970s, this meant the descendants of Irish, French Canadian, Greek, and other immigrants who had provided the textile labour force during the city's industrial heyday. These descendants, now firmly middle class, held the reins of much political and financial power in the city, and had signed onto the heritage revitalisation plan in large part because they saw it as a way of honouring their forebears and celebrating a vigorous sense of local culture and identity. The Mogan Cultural Center, then, was a place where professional public historians at the national park came into close working contact with those who spoke for the city. Completed in 1989, the centre housed an extensive local history archive run by the

University of Massachusetts/Lowell, meeting and temporary exhibition spaces, and a permanent exhibit about the working people of Lowell.

In its first five years, the Mogan Center hosted a fairly popular series of exhibitions created by local residents with Preservation Commission assistance. But the consensus among informants appeared to be, as one local cultural leader put it, 'What didn't work out was somehow having the community *drive* this building ... It didn't take on the character of a community cultural centre with the community in the lead.' This appeared to be largely due to the prominent role played by the Preservation Commission. Heavily funded and dominant within the heritage revitalisation effort, it had significant local membership and tended to speak for 'the community' to the extent that there was no structural need and little actual opportunity for other leadership to emerge from within the city. When the commission's term expired in 1995, the Mogan Center's community exhibits and other special programming were left without funding and without an institutionalised local presence to sustain them. Shortly before my fieldwork began, national park management had responded to public concern about the resulting lack of a local voice in the park's productions by appointing a new advisory committee for the Mogan Center, comprising three public historians from the park, three representatives from the university, and three 'at-large' community members. Along with a half-time coordinator hired by the park to oversee the centre, this group was charged with reanimating the Mogan Center and helping it to achieve its original goal of becoming a lively and inclusive community space—a goal now somewhat complicated by the arrival of many sizeable new immigrant groups in the city in the years since the founding of the park. Park managers were particularly concerned about making connections to these new groups. The recent immigrants represented not only an extension of the park's interpretive narrative about immigration, a changing labour force, and ethnicity, but also an important future constituency in the city and a reflection of wider demographic changes in the USA as a whole—an issue of some importance for a federal agency whose funding base is potentially affected by the good will or indifference of local and national electorates. The community representatives on the committee were clearly selected with this goal in mind. All were people of colour and/or associated in some way with the city's newer ethnic communities, while the park and university representatives were white and not marked as ethnic except in the case of one man who was from Lowell's long-assimilated French Canadian community. At the same time, the community members were drawn from the same educated professional classes as the park and university representatives, and were associated with the same tightly integrated network of organisations and institutions that had long been active in historic preservation and cultural production in the city. While attempting to forge new relationships across ethnic lines, then, the national park managers who selected the advisory committee continued to evade the realities of class and socio-economic difference underlying their separation from the city's recent immigrant populations.

Park managers and the new Mogan Cultural Center Community Committee alike wanted to make an immediate and striking statement about the centre's revitalisation.<sup>4</sup> The committee proposed to host a professionally produced re-inaugural exhibition for

which it budgeted \$15,000. According to the call for proposals, the chosen theme, 'The People of Lowell: Past and Present', was intended to produce an exhibit that would 'reflect the city's social mosaic in a way that contributes to positive cross-cultural exchanges among residents' and 'present the personality of the city and its people in a creative way'. Because of time constraints, potential exhibitors had just over a month to respond, resulting in a very small pool of proposals. Most of these were from people already closely affiliated with the Lowell heritage realm, who were proposing to make considerable use of previously exhibited material. Only one, from a pair of Boston-area folklorists who had done contract work on various folk-life projects in Lowell, met the committee's key criterion of promoting cross-cultural exchange. This project, 'Feasting on Lowell', used food as a starting point for talking about the city's people. The folklorists planned to include an exhibit on the city's ethnic food markets, a small-scale academic conference, and a series of 'foodways performances', essentially cookery demonstrations with cultural commentary, by people from Lowell's various ethnic communities.

The advisory committee was divided over the merits of this proposal. Some committee members expressed concern over the lack of new research or material and the fact that the presenters were from outside the city and could not, therefore, speak authoritatively about local identity. One member, in particular, objected to the linkage of food with ethnicity, which he saw as 'domesticating' immigrants and other local people in a stereotypical and somewhat demeaning way. Others, including the public historians from the park, supported the folklorists' contention that the subject of food could be a useful lens for looking at inter-cultural relationships and the construction of ethnic identities, something they hoped the proposed conference might address. Supporters of the 'foodways' project also noted that it was the only proposal with an element of social exchange and encounter, as opposed to more conventional displays of wall text and images. With the clock ticking and a planned re-inaugural open house not far away, the committee quickly debated its options. The dominant voices in this discussion were those of the park and university representatives on the committee. The community representatives were much less vocal; in fact, they were much less often present at the meetings, which were held during regular working hours and so posed a difficulty for members whose employers were not part of the close circle of heritage institutions that included the national park and the university. It was clear from my observations of these meetings that an overriding concern for the dominant members was to avoid open clashes within the committee itself. Although there were strong feelings for and against the 'foodways' proposal, no one seemed willing to take a definite stance if it might provoke a confrontation. Instead, through a series of small compromises, the proposal was whittled down before finally being accepted. The display of previously exhibited materials was dropped, as was the conference idea. What was left was a series of three small-scale food demonstrations, the first of which was scheduled to take place at the May 2002 re-inaugural open house.

This first Feasting on Lowell element took place at the end of a morning of community activities at the Mogan Center (see Figure 2). In front of an audience of about 20 people, a Cambodian woman and a younger Laotian-American woman demonstrated



**Figure 2** Participants in the May 2002 ‘Feasting on Lowell’ foodways demonstration, Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center, Lowell National Historical Park.

salad-making techniques. A Cambodian-American man who frequently acted as a liaison between Cambodians and Euro-Americans in Lowell translated for the Cambodian woman, who did not speak English fluently, while the folklorists provided occasional comments and served as hosts, displaying the completed dishes and urging the audience to sample them. Questions from the audience were undemanding—‘Why do you boil the chicken instead of roasting it?’—and were more often answered by the folklorists than the performers themselves. The atmosphere was friendly and casual, but the Southeast Asians remained on one side of the table, the mostly Western attendees on the other. The audience was somewhat more culturally diverse than others at national park events, largely because it included some invited guests from various cultural groups in the city, but it was still heavily weighted towards national park employees and familiar faces from the city’s network of heritage organisations. It was a pleasant enough gathering, and most of us who attended it enjoyed tasting the Southeast Asian salads and socialising casually with people we knew. But when viewed in a more critical light, it was clear that the ‘foodways’ performance did nothing to challenge the feel-good aura of multiculturalism that imbues many heritage productions, including many in Lowell. Instead, the event reproduced a troubling and all-too-familiar pattern of colourful ethnic ‘others’ performing their culture for the gaze of people of European descent. This unproblematic exoticism might have been countered either by the aborted academic conference or by more vigorous discussion within the committee—for instance, in the form of a stronger stance by the advisory committee member who had argued against the clichéd linking of ethnicity and food.

But both these elements had been lost in the series of compromises that produced the programme. There now follows an analysis of the forces that shaped those compromises, and the various frustrations and dissatisfactions that resulted among organisers and performers alike.

### **Analysis**

On the surface, the social and discursive dynamics operating in the Feasting on Lowell event seemed relatively straightforward: a group of professional outsiders (the public historians at the national park and the non-local folklorists) and people from dominant local groups had collaborated to create an event that placed subordinate 'others' on display while effectively excluding them from decision-making roles in the production. The Southeast Asian cooks were placed in a position of what Dean MacCannell has termed 'forced traditionalism',<sup>5</sup> performing their culture in a way that would not have been required of the folklorists, the public historians, or the local cultural activists. The analysis of such social and cultural disparities forms the backbone of much of the anthropological study of heritage and tourism.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, MacCannell has famously argued that 'sightseeing is a ritual performed to the differentiations of society',<sup>7</sup> and that tourism itself is both a producer and a characteristic product of those differentiations.

In its broad outline, then, the Feasting on Lowell event would seem to fit into the model of dominant versus subordinate social groups and discourses of traditionalism versus modernity. This interpretation could unfold along those now-familiar lines, as a critique of hegemonic heritage practices that reproduce social inequalities and leave limited room for 'others' to determine the representational agenda. But my focus on the part played by public historians in this event and my concern with a possible role for scholarly inquiry within such cultural productions lead me to choose a somewhat different approach. As Peggy Sanday has argued:

While asymmetry may be universal, the lines that divide people into unequal classes are not. Most interesting for social change is an analysis of how particular asymmetries arise in specific historical contexts and social arenas. The public-interest arm of such research involves making this knowledge easily accessible first to interested publics and secondly to the discursive arena of public-interest debate.<sup>8</sup>

In order to explore the lines of inequality operating on this particular occasion, my starting point is the singular lack of enthusiasm on the part of all the participants and producers about the May 2002 presentation, and their shared desire—communicated in interviews and conversations—to see more egalitarian kinds of cultural exchange taking place in the Mogan Cultural Center and in the city as a whole. From there, I move to the question of why the food demonstration developed as it did despite this apparent openness to a rethinking of the kinds of outmoded patterns reproduced in the event.

Several potentially critical perspectives were operating within the selection and performance processes described above. First, the entrenched local voice, represented by the long-established cultural activists who occupied two of the three university seats on the advisory committee, tended to resist the representational authority of non-locals and to insist that cultural productions in Lowell, especially those dealing with the



contemporary city, should be meaningful and accountable to people from the city itself. One of these people had worked as the director of cultural affairs for the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission more than a decade earlier. During the creation of the Working People exhibit in the Mogan Center, he had successfully blocked a proposal by the exhibition design team to depict a 19th-century Lowell immigrant family seated around a kitchen table discussing labour and political issues, in part on the grounds that such portrayals marginalised immigrants instead of showing them as active players in the city's political, social, and economic life. He raised concerns about this same clichéd linkage of food and ethnicity during discussions about the Mogan Center re-inaugural programme, although his objections were voiced less vigorously than they had been in the earlier case, for reasons discussed below.

The second set of potentially critical voices came from the heritage practitioners—the public historians and public folklorists—whose training and politics generally prompted them to argue that cultural productions should include acts of contextualisation and linkages to broader and often critical patterns of interpretation. The folklorists specifically countered the fact of their outsider status by noting, as one of them did in an interview, that ‘there is a purpose to be served by this anthropological role. There are things that we can do as outsiders, that we can see as outsiders, that we can kind of oversee, that you can't do when you're on the inside’—for example, to provide a critical or comparative perspective that could have value for everyone involved. However, the Mogan Center event as it eventually developed was frustrating to them because it offered no opportunities to build long-term relationships across class and cultural lines, and because their position as outside contractors gave them no platform from which to create anything more lasting. As one put it:

It would be nice if ... we were asked to do a little more, kind of ... participate to help develop this stuff and not just be an adjunct. I feel a little like a stewardess. I would like to be a co-pilot rather than a stewardess. But I also want to be paid if I'm going to be a co-pilot. I don't want to be paid as if I'm a stewardess.

Finally, the Southeast Asian performers had at least some ability to challenge and provide alternatives to the dominant patterns of heritage display as they played out in the ‘foodways’ demonstration. This potential operated in a very minor way, but it was perceptible nonetheless. As Richard Bauman and Patricia Sawin demonstrate for participants in the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, the Feasting on Lowell performers were:

agents, reflexive, adaptive, and critical, crafting the representations in which they are involved, working to figure out what they should and could be doing within a folklife [production], negotiating their way through structures of power and authority, and offering firm, if usually good-humored, resistance when they feel that their own sense of identity and self-worth is impinged upon by others.<sup>9</sup>

At the Lowell event, the Cambodian translator gently lampooned the authority of the National Park Service by borrowing a park ranger's hat and using it as an element of his teasing portrayal of a television cooking show host (‘I can cook! Everybody can cook!’). An adept and committed community activist, the translator also saw the event

as an opportunity to bring into public heritage space at least one person—the Cambodian cook—who had not hitherto had any public presence within the city’s heritage productions. The cook agreed that this was a positive experience for her, noting that she was particularly pleased that her grandchildren had been able to see her speaking and demonstrating her knowledge in public, since it portrayed her as a person with worthwhile knowledge to share and also showed that Cambodian culture was of interest to dominant social groups in the city. While she was somewhat bemused at the considerable attention paid to what was to her a very ordinary chicken salad, she seemed willing to mobilise a certain amount of strategic essentialism, a depiction of inherited Cambodian tradition, in order to make a statement about the importance of Cambodians within contemporary Lowell. On the other hand, the translator told me he thought this kind of event ‘could be more diversified and more often, not just a one-way thing, you know’. When I noted that it was usually only ethnic others, not members of the dominant culture, who were expected to perform their culture in ways framed as folkloric or traditional, he quickly agreed that including an American woman in the salad-making demonstration would have produced a very different kind of event:

And then the Cambodians can learn, too. Like a lot of Cambodians don’t learn about American cooking, because they ... take their kids to McDonald’s and Burger King, but the real American cooking, they can learn, you know. Because there’s healthy ways of eating, you know, you can learn about diet, you can learn about nutrition ... So I think learning shouldn’t be like just one way. Whenever you do creative programs you should think of ways you can teach the other and the other teaches you ...

*[Do you see things like that happening now around Lowell?]*

Not really. I don’t see a lot happening among Hispanics and Asians, among whites and Hispanics and Asians. I don’t see a lot of getting together in that way. I think people still live in their own ethnic enclaves and there isn’t much going on. But we need to do more.

Like the translator, the other cultural producers involved in this and other events in Lowell articulated a vision of their work as ultimately facilitating a healthier, more democratic and egalitarian society. As one of the folklorists put it, ‘It’s really important to figure out how to do culture, class, sharing of not only raw power but conceptual power, cultural and conceptual power ... That’s sort of what the whole point is: everybody not only sharing but evening up the relationship. And ... I guess I see myself standing at the fulcrum.’ She talked about the idea of moving her freelance career from the Boston area to Lowell in an attempt to realise this vision: ‘[T]hat would be the challenge. Do it there. Go in and do it. If you can do it there, other people could do it somewhere else. Whatever “it” is. I’m not sure what “it” is exactly, but that would be part of the challenge.’ Another informant, a public historian hired as an exhibition consultant by the national park, similarly felt that the time was ripe for a breakthrough, or a return, to a more truly community-oriented and democratic public history, although she shared the folklorist’s inability to precisely define what form that might take:

I have to believe it is going to emerge, because it always seems to come around in a cycle ... Where it's going to emerge from, I don't know ... There's no model to follow, federal or otherwise ... Somebody needs to emerge as a voice, and I don't know where it's going to come from right now.

The Mogan Center advisory committee member who had formerly been cultural affairs director of the Historic Preservation Commission also articulated to me a persuasive vision of how the city's heritage project could foster a vigorous and inclusive community culture:

[I]f you end up with your history on a wall that's a dead end, then this thing hasn't turned out the way it's supposed to. It's supposed to continually sort of regenerate ... because you want people to remember what happened here, absorb it, integrate it into the way that they move through the world now.

For him, public history, art, and culture were about 'not being alienated' from one's surroundings, neighbours, and larger political and social contexts.

What blocked the fuller operation of the various critical and potentially critical perspectives in the creation of the Feasting on Lowell event and kept it from fulfilling its producers' and performers' desires for a less hierarchical, more participatory mode of cultural contact, representation, and exchange? My research suggests that the answer lies in the specific construction of Lowell's heritage sphere over the past 30 years. Within this tightly interconnected network of people and institutions, a clear balance of authority has been worked out between locals and outsiders. The city's heritage revitalisation effort is in essence a local project that has been exceptionally successful in enlisting the resources of outside professionals and institutions (such as the US National Park Service) to aid in the transformation of an industrial city to a post-industrial one. But Lowellians, like people in other de-industrialised places, have learned a hard lesson about allowing their future to be determined by those who may not be permanently rooted in the city. For civic leaders who have not forgotten the effects of the textile mills' abandonment, the heritage project offers a means of avoiding past mistakes. One local cultural activist, speaking of Patrick Mogan's vision for the city's revitalisation, told me that:

[O]ne of the lessons that I took from [Mogan] was the wisdom of trying to guide this whole revival effort toward resources that are indigenous. And that's why to me the whole cultural sector has been so fascinating, and I believe, fruitful and potentially more fruitful. Because it's about our architecture, our geography, our history, the contemporary expression—things that somebody can't move out of town. You know, it's investing in the things that can't be taken away from you, or that somebody on their own can't decide to remove. And so I think there's a lot of good thinking behind this.

Over the past three decades, authority within Lowell's cultural sector has been carefully apportioned between long-established local people, newcomers who have recently settled in the city, and professional outsiders. These outsiders include most of the public historians at the park, who do not live in the city itself but often commute from a considerable distance. The city's newcomers include not only the new professional class of entrepreneurs, artists, and planners who have been attracted to Lowell in recent years but also the city's many new immigrants. Like the professionals, both of these

types of newcomers are valued for what they can bring to the city's revitalisation effort—managerial skills, political connections or a confirmation of Lowell's 'vibrant' ethnic diversity and continuing immigrant history. At the same time, these people are not granted truly local status by long-term locals until they have demonstrated a multi-generational loyalty to the city. Recent immigrants pose a particular danger in this respect. The inherent particularism and oppositionality of much ethnic discourse, the socio-economic disparities that disrupt Lowell's carefully crafted image of itself as a prosperous post-industrial place, and the complex transnational loyalties of many migrants all constitute possible challenges to the city's heritage realm. Thus the Cambodian cook's focus on strengthening her own authority in her grandchildren's eyes while asserting the importance of Cambodians within Lowell ran somewhat counter to the broader goals of park managers and the dominant representatives on the Mogan Center committee, who were seeking to uphold an established and unifying pan-ethnic discourse about culture and community. Similarly, the translator, like many of the younger and well-educated refugees in Lowell, felt strongly drawn to use his skills to help rebuild his home country, to which he returned shortly after the 2002 'foodways' demonstration. In the long term, his differing loyalties made him unaccountable to the Lowell heritage realm. This lack of accountability to a project so intimately connected with the city's recuperation makes those who act as gatekeepers for the heritage realm reluctant to hand over their guardianship of it to new immigrants who have not yet proved their loyalty to Lowell. This wariness, rather than any more malign or chauvinistic impulses, lies behind the cautious selection of the Mogan Center committee's at-large representatives. At the same time, the local cultural activists I spoke with seemed aware that their own fierce loyalty in many ways worked against the inclusion of new voices in the heritage project, and acknowledged that leadership of the project needed to be broadened for both philosophical and pragmatic reasons. Their question was how to ensure succession without losing what had been gained through such concerted effort over many years.

While discursive authority in Lowell's heritage sphere is carefully balanced among long-time locals, newcomers, and outsiders, the creation of that sphere has also fostered the growth of a new class of cultural producers from all three categories. This class of people includes professional and amateur public historians, educators, artists, planners, performers and producers of many types who form a close-knit group in this small city. A local man active in this group for many years confirmed that 'There's a kind of an activist tribe that know each other and seem to show up again and again and again.' Within this tribe, long-standing personal and professional relationships have developed over many years within an unusually well-funded and cohesive heritage-based redevelopment project. These relationships tend to produce collaboration and cooperation rather than conflict, and serve, along with the balance of power between insiders and outsiders, to explain the striking lack of open dissent among the dominant voices on the Mogan Center advisory committee. Because the folklorists themselves were a part of this network of cultural producers, they were less willing than they might otherwise have been to express vocal opposition to the changes and compromises that produced the watered-down 'foodways' presentation.

An ethnographic analysis, then, reveals the many layers of negotiation, relationship, and investment beneath the surface of this apparently unexceptional event. Cultural performance theory is helpful in examining these subtle currents and showing how they relate to much larger forces and events. Although a good deal of the cultural performance literature, like the literature on tourism, has tended to focus on sharply unequal and oppositional relationships between dominant and subordinate (often indigenous) groups, this body of theory also recognises that cultural performance is sometimes about maintenance rather than change, and that there may be as much social activity going on in a seemingly static performance as in a dramatic or confrontational one. In Victor Turner's words:

Even when ... conflict may appear to be muted or deflected or rendered as a playful or joyous struggle, it is not hard to detect threads of connection between elements of the play and sources of conflict in sociocultural milieus. The very mufflings and evasions of scenes of discord in some theatrical and natural traditions speak eloquently to their real presence in society, and may perhaps be regarded as a cultural defense-mechanism against conflict rather than a metacommentary upon it.<sup>10</sup>

Kirk Fuoss insists that all forms of cultural performance, in which we can include the many forms of display connected with heritage, are by nature agonistic, and that the task for the scholar examining them is to determine whether they maintain or subvert status quo relations of power, what strategies are utilised for this directional movement, and in what arenas these strategies are employed.<sup>11</sup> It is this type of analysis that I have attempted above for the Feasting on Lowell event.

Following Fuoss's model, I argue that this particular cultural performance worked to maintain a set of existing relationships established during the late 1970s and 1980s as Lowell's heritage revitalisation plan took shape. While there is an undeniable component of aggressive economic redevelopment to this plan which shapes much of what happens within the heritage sphere, the project is not monolithic and includes many social and cultural activists, like some of the public historians who were my primary focus, who sincerely desire to use their work in counter-hegemonic ways. The fact that they were unable to do so in this case can be explained by the very high degree of concern over succession and stewardship within the cultural sector of the redevelopment project, along with the close and carefully balanced interrelationships that have developed among the knowledge and culture workers who constitute Lowell's new class of cultural producers, plus a certain material anxiety on the part of those who are dependent for a living on short-term public funding. Through a series of administrative decisions (for example, the holding of meetings during the working day, which limited the pool of potential new community representation on the Mogan Center advisory committee) and discursive choices which strategically avoided strong expressions of dissent or opposition, the considerable critical and participatory potential of the centre's re-inaugural event was blunted, resulting in a programme that pleased no one and reproduced hierarchical, traditionalising patterns of display that worked against the committee's desired goal of more egalitarian cultural contact.

## Opportunities

The key question remains—can an analysis such as this become part of public discourse in a way that might support the very similar goals of performers, producers, and scholarly critics alike? How might anthropological inquiry have opened this shared discontent and capitalised on the latent potential for positive social change? In this concluding section I suggest three avenues for approaching this task without wholly abandoning the scholar's traditional emphasis on observation rather than advocacy.

First, it is crucial that anthropologists and other academic heritage scholars raise their voices in forums populated by the new class of professional practitioners who increasingly populate the heritage field, not just in Western countries but around the globe. The emergence of this new class of cultural producers offers useful opportunities for dialogue across disciplinary boundaries and, more important, across the divide between scholarship and practice. I regularly attend conferences of public historians, where I am generally the only anthropologist present, but where my anthropologically informed approach has often provoked lively and productive discussion and where I am stimulated in turn by the opportunity to exchange views with those who are actively doing the things I am studying. Many of these practitioners already speak our theoretical languages and share some of our political concerns. In Lowell, in fact, my public historian informants often revealed themselves to be familiar with the scholarly literature I was using to try to understand Lowell myself; in a few cases, they had even contributed to that literature.<sup>12</sup> To a large extent, it is the presence of increasing numbers of heritage professionals that creates the porous boundary identified here as a key characteristic of scholarly study of heritage productions and an important opportunity for greater exchange between scholarship and public heritage practices. By engaging in this way with informants who are also peers and in some sense colleagues, we by no means avoid the kind of angry 'native' responses that Briggs has noted in the case of the 'invention of tradition' literature. In fact, we open ourselves more fully to the possibility of challenges on our own home turf, as Eric Gable and Richard Handler found when their critical analysis of the work of social historians at Colonial Williamsburg<sup>13</sup> provoked a sharply worded response from the institution's vice president for research, Cary Carson, in the *Journal of American History*. However, while disagreeing strongly with the anthropologists' overall framework, Carson also noted that some of their specific observations had prompted reflection at the institution, and predicted that the book resulting from their research would 'occupy an honored place on the reference shelf for years to come'.<sup>14</sup> Such an acknowledgement points to the activist potential inherent in studies of heritage even when scholars do not move beyond their conventional role as researchers and writers. For anthropologists in particular, this exchange shows us the possibilities for inquiries that move beyond the socio-economic disparities between researcher and informant that have historically characterised the discipline.

Claiming common discursive ground with heritage professionals, of course, by no means implies that critical scholars should entirely abandon their focus on the subaltern, the marginalised, the silenced. In fact, our ability to provide a simultaneous

dual focus—on those who are excluded or subordinated through heritage practices as well as those who control those practices—may be one of the most important contributions we can make to a public interest approach to heritage studies. This brings me to my second suggestion for a more activist academic study of heritage. If we are able to enter more directly into the discursive fields we study through participation in conferences and other gatherings of heritage professionals, perhaps we can find ways to go a step farther and locate—or create—settings (for example, conferences or community projects) where we can encounter not only other scholars and professional heritage practitioners but also, crucially, the community activist groups whose voices are so often mediated or not heard at heritage sites. By working to clarify underlying motivations and causes at the sites we study—for example, the anxiety about succession that worked against the inclusion of a wider range of community representation at the Mogan Cultural Center—we may be able to help reframe conversations among disparate groups and move discussions away from more surface issues. Such efforts could prompt a re-envisioning so that all of us operating in these discursive fields can see ourselves as people working to create a community of representation rather than simply a representation of community, as a narrower view of heritage practices would have it.

Finally, anthropologists studying heritage should be bolder about doing what we have always done in other settings—talking about specific social characteristics and relationships and how they are linked with discursive practices and the workings of power. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has proposed that academic folklore has ‘an important cooperative role’ to play in addressing the kinds of inequalities and exclusions that public folklore projects, like the *Feasting on Lowell* presentation, all too often mask. She calls on scholars to take ‘an ethnographic approach to the public sector ... and to the impact of particular projects and activities on those involved’.<sup>15</sup> Thorough ethnographic studies of heritage sites are becoming more common, but scholars still seem reluctant to probe into the class and cultural positioning of our peer informants. As a result, we have almost no empirically grounded studies of professional heritage practitioners operating as social actors within a broad cultural context. Richard Maddox has argued that this kind of imbalance:

inevitably skews our understanding of the contemporary world because it makes it difficult, if not impossible, to trace and analyse the linkages between what is going on in places near the top and centres of the global pecking order and what is happening in sites near the bottom and on the margins.<sup>16</sup>

By articulating our findings about social relationships and characteristics, not just discursive practices, and by doing so in arenas populated by our informants themselves, we may be able to hold a mirror up to the heritage field that can contribute to the reframing called for above.

My own proudest achievement in this effort came at a conference of the National Council on Public History in the spring of 2003, when I presented a demographic study of public historians in Lowell that focused on their socio-economic positioning and its relationship to the history presented at the national park. I made use of some

autobiographical material in a recent book on Lowell by folklorist Martha Norkunas, who was in the room. When the panel presentations were finished, she said: 'I've never been *studied* before. It's a funny feeling!' In that moment, I knew I had done something to realign the politics of representation, something that might contribute towards an eventual levelling of the ground between the credentialed scholars and gatekeepers in the conference hotel room and the two Southeast Asian women who had been cutting up vegetables and mixing fish sauce for an audience in Lowell a year before.

## Notes

- [1] Briggs, 'Metadiscursive Practices'. Anthropology, with its disciplinary focus on social dynamics and its recent spasm of self-criticism about the relationships of ethnographers to their informants, offers unique advantages for understanding these social arenas, and I draw primarily on anthropological literature in this article. However, the issues under discussion are germane to any of the disciplines involved in the heritage field, from history and folklore to architectural preservation and urban planning.
- [2] Clifford, *Routes*, 176.
- [3] Gall (1991), O'Har (1999), and Ryan (1987) have chronicled this process, which was an early example of the now-common set of strategies known in the UK as 'culture-led regeneration'.
- [4] I attended most of the committee's meetings leading up to its re-inaugural event in May 2002, and interviewed nearly all the committee members as well as others involved in the May event.
- [5] MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 178.
- [6] See, for example, Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Maasai on the Lawn'; Briggs, 'The Politics of Discursive Authority'; Clifford, *Routes*; Desmond, *Staging Tourism*; Guss, *The Festive State*; MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds*.
- [7] MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 13.
- [8] Sanday, 'Defining Public Interest Anthropology', 7, <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/anthro/CPIA/whatispia/pia1998.html>
- [9] Bauman and Sawin, 'The Politics of Participation in Folklife Festivals', 312.
- [10] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 105–6.
- [11] Fuoss, 'Performance as Contestation', 98–99.
- [12] Becker, *Selling Tradition*; Norkunas, *Monuments and Memory*.
- [13] Gable and Handler, 'Colonialist Anthropology'; Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*.
- [14] Carson, 'Lost in the Fun House', 141.
- [15] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Mistaken Dichotomies', 152.
- [16] Maddox, 'Bombs, Bikinis', 289.

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