

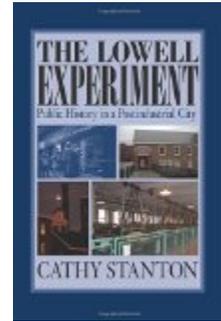
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cathy Stanton. *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006. xvi + 304 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-546-3; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-547-0.

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Published on H-Urban (March, 2007)



Working History

Lowell's history is industry. Lowell, Massachusetts, has an industrial past, and contemporary Lowell uses its history to work for the city. Cathy Stanton's study, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City*, poses questions about the meaning of the past for the present. This ethnographic study of Lowell's public history demonstrates care for a community in flux as well as respect for (and critique of) local knowledge and public memory. Stanton's scholarship is informed by participation in public history and, in turn, her analysis and reflection can help inform that very public history.

The Lowell National Historical Park was created in 1978. According to its mission statement, the park "preserves and interprets the nationally significant historic and cultural sites, structures and districts in Lowell, Massachusetts, that represent the most significant planned industrial city in the United States and symbolize, in physical form, the Industrial Revolution. The Park tells the human story of the Industrial Revolution and the changing role of technology in a nineteenth- and twentieth-century setting" (p. xiii). Stanton studies the modes of memory-making at the Lowell National Historical Park primarily via analyzing the tours organized by the Park.

Stanton examines Lowell's return to the past for a vision of the future, a future that is both "attractive to tourists" without compromising "difficult and complex histories" (p. 7). Stanton argues "that there is a clear pat-

tern to the choices and omissions reflected in the park's interpretation, and that this pattern is ultimately shaped by the park's role within the city's broader revitalization effort, which works in many ways to support the celebratory multiculturalism and narrative of economic rebirth on which the city's reinvented identity is based" (p. xiv).

Stanton's book has in three parts: "History, Performance, Ethnography"; "Three Tours of Lowell"; and "Public History in Lowell." Part 1 chronicles the contemporary public history movement in Lowell as well as explains her methodology. Stanton assesses the problems and possibilities of being a participant-observer in Lowell's cultural performances. In part 2, Stanton leads the reader on tours of the "mill and canal" and the city's poorest neighborhood and then looks at historic preservation efforts within the city's economic redevelopment project.

Part 3 considers the creation of public history. The penultimate chapter presents a "demographic" analysis of Lowell's public history, an analysis that takes into account the socioeconomic experiences of the public historians themselves. Who are the cultural workers producing interpretative frames of Lowell's past? Stanton examines the "professional, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds" of the public historians working in Lowell, and "why their critical questioning has made so few inroads into the subject matter of Lowell's more recent history or the larger trajectory of capitalist development" (p. 132). In a later chapter, on rituals of reconnection,

Stanton uses Victor Turner's notion of ritual to interpret what the visitors and public historians are doing when they conjoin their actions in Lowell. Here she touches on the meaningfulness of the symbolic act of interpreting history.

Stanton demonstrates that social relationships make links operative in the social life of the city today (between a progressive impulse to link inquiry with public participation, and the links between past and present). In chapter 7, Stanton's examination of how participants in city life embody and call upon the discourses of "localness" and "outsiderhood" will have particular resonance for scholars of public history or urban communication. "So significant is the distinction between locals and outsiders in Lowell that many local people use a specific term for those who live in the city but were not born there: such a person is a 'blow-in,' a term that appears to have originated as a description of Irish natives of colonial administrators and other English people of professional classes in Ireland.... People who work in the city but do not live in the immediate area are not even granted blow-in status; they are outsiders, plain and simple" (p. 190). This distinction occurs in other places as well, and Stanton has written a careful examination of how certain symbolic terms function as markers of belonging and as how the terms do the work of inclusion and exclusion themselves.

Stanton's clear, compelling prose provides a model for anthropological study of one's socioeconomic equals. Her focus on the patterns of historical display is punctuated by descriptions of unusual moments, both in and outside the norm. In 2001, for example, in front of a demonstration loom designed to show the difficult working conditions that the mill girls of Lowell faced many years ago, Stanton was surprised when the park ranger leading the group tour interwove the story of how that loom arrived in the museum. That the designers had to search worldwide for items like looms, and that they are still in use in factories in other countries, proved startling to the listeners. The ranger noted the contemporary consumer choices the tourists face when they purchase clothing. He provided a short lecture on the etymology of the word "labor" as "to suffer" in Latin. And when you think about the suffering that goes into making cloth, back in history and even to the present day, it's just something to think about" (p. 61). This remarkable moment was atypical, and provided Stanton with clues about the disjunction the park officials have in the contemporary capitalist period with Lowell's industrialist and de-industrialized pasts.

In a fascinating epilogue, Stanton notes that a critique of contemporary life is emerging. The "Run of the Mill" tour now contains a new exhibit designed to involve visitors' experiences as consumers with the labor of mill workers (pp. 230-231). Further, as of 2005, "The Boott Mills exhibit renovation ... turned out to be almost everything I had hoped for but not expected to see" (p. 231). I wonder what impact Stanton's ethnographic interventions had on the interpretative work of the National History Park? Lowell's National History Park contains provocative interpretations, and Stanton's critiques of the tours provide equally provocative arguments. She claims that both the park officials and tourists are uneasy with contemporary poverty and racism, and that this discomfort is manifested in the unified and linear progression of history in the park interpretations; unease is swept away. The park's connection to contemporary immigrants is tenuous. Stanton has "argued that the national park is shaped and driven primarily by the need to reinvent the city's economy within changing regional, national, and global realities, and that on many levels, this agenda deeply limits both what Lowell's public historians say about present-day economic conditions and the kinds of audiences to whom they speak. Within this setting, specific kinds of visitors reassure themselves of their places within the new socioeconomic order. This ritual is facilitated by professional public historians—keepers of a postindustrial shrine—who resemble those visitors in many significant ways" (p. 176). It is precisely this "feeling of *communitas* between participants and the larger society" (p. 178) that makes additional critique more difficult. "The history on display at Lowell NHP is unusually critical and progressive, raising questions of exploitation, inequality, and agency within industrial capitalism. Yet one of the park's primary functions is to turn those difficult questions into a system of positive reinforcement for people who have already managed to free themselves—however tenuously—from the most damaging effects of working within a system dedicated ultimately to profit" (p. 179).

Stanton exhibits an excellent command of the relevant literature. She notes, however, that "to date, most historiography (that is, studies of the work of the historical profession), and virtually all of it that pertains to public history as a field, has been written by historians themselves" (pp. 17-18). The consequence, she adds, is that historians often lack a reflective turn on their own positions *vis-à-vis* their subjects. I want to point readers to another area that, although Stanton does not mention it, would be helpful in reflecting on the public's histories.

Rhetorical history as a subfield in communication studies is one area where rhetoricians have examined the crafting of history and have used reflexivity to create “productive criticism.”[1] Rhetorical history in this sense “use[s] comparison with our past critically to point us in the direction of the future.”[2] The rhetorical turn in the social sciences occurred alongside a movement to chart the discourses of the past as part of the public’s history. There are other movements that examine historical monuments as rhetorical.[3] Cultural performance studies attends to some of these dynamics, and rhetorical studies can provide an added layer of strategy and identification.

There is much to recommend in this book. Those with interests in ethnography, heritage and history, the importance of people over forces (or as a force), labor and capital, community design, as well the work of public historians, will enjoy reading Stanton’s thoughtful analysis of Lowell’s ongoing experiment.

Notes

[1]. For rhetoricians examining the crafting of history see Celeste Michelle Condit and John Louis Lucaites, *Crafting Equality: America’s Anglo-African Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Kathleen Turner, *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998). On using reflexivity to create productive criticism, see Robert L. Ivie, “Productive Criticism Then and Now,” *American Journal of Communication* 4 (Spring 2001), online at <http://www.acjournal.org/>.

[2]. John Louis Lucaites, “Ben Franklin and *The Bell Curve*: Rhetoric, Race, and Affirmative Action,” *Fragments* (2001): n.p. Available online http://www.mcgees.net/fragments/essays/guests/Ben.Franklin.and.The.Bell.Curve.htm#_ednref50.

[3]. Carole Blair and Neil Michel, “Reproducing Civil Rights Tactics: The Rhetorical Performances of the Civil Rights Memorial,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30 (2000): 31-55.

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Citation: Rebecca Townsend. Review of Stanton, Cathy, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 2007.

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