

**FROM THE FRONTLINE TO THE PICKET LINE: PUBLIC HISTORY AND
THE CULTURAL LABOR REVOLUTION**

A Thesis
Submitted to
The Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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May 2020

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ABSTRACT

A dramatic wave of unionizing in the museum world over the past year has sparked new conversations about labor and collective organizing throughout the cultural sector. Yet while those at the forefront of these conversations hope to leverage this moment into a cohesive movement, cultural labor activism has manifested in different ways throughout the cultural sector. This thesis seeks to understand the specific role of public history within the recent movement, through interviews with staff members involved in organizing efforts at their museum/historic site and media coverage of both successful and failed union drives.

The goal of this work is to bring together the many disparate threads of conversation surrounding cultural labor activism to highlight the specific ways that public historical work prevents social movements. This thesis will build upon an existing yet nascent scholarship on public historical labor to contextualize this moment in a way that will appeal to a broad cross section of cultural workers. This analysis also offers potential solutions to build on the momentum of this current cultural revolution, such as calling on professional organizations like the National Council of Public History to become a player in the fight for public history labor protections.

DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Yetta Diamond, who persevered through so many “crazy times” and convinced me I could do the same. To Mom, Dad, Hannah and Ron, who fill the crazy times with love and laughter. And to Wyatt, because even a thesis is better when its written with a cat on your lap.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I started this project, I wasn't sure if I would be able to get the information I was hoping for: for many public history and museum workers, union discussions can jeopardize their jobs and livelihood. I am so thankful to the frontline history workers who were willing to share their stories and experiences with me, many who needed to remain anonymous due to the risk such sharing could pose.

Thank you to Dr. Rachel Boyle and Dr. Amy Tyson who were willing to share their knowledge and expertise on the topic of public historical labor, whose work and dedication to making public historical labor visible has made this conversation possible. For their support, humor and commitment to the emotional work this thesis hopes to highlight, thanks to my coworkers on the frontlines at Eastern State Penitentiary, who remind me why this work is worth fighting for.

Finally, thank you to my adviser Dr. Seth Bruggeman, who believed in me even when I felt like I was giving a million reasons not to. I could not have written a word of this without your support, guidance and expertise. If this work can make any difference in the field, it is because you made me believe it could.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: A MOMENT BECOMES A MOVEMENT

It's a movement, not a trend.

At least, that's the slogan museum workers have adopted over this past year, as a wave of unionization efforts and labor advocacy has swept the cultural sector. Rebuking press reports of unionization as a "trend" trickling through the art world, museum employees from New York to Los Angeles are intent to prove this recent union fervor is more than just a passing fancy.¹

"There are plenty of movements inside and outside the arts and culture sector that last long enough to put a petition or a public program together that highlights a problem, but don't last longer than a Twitter cycle, or an ephemeral action," writes the Art and Museum Transparency collective, a group of cultural workers behind the viral Salary Transparency Spreadsheet, an editable document intended to raise awareness and encourage solidarity surrounding labor conditions within the cultural sector. "One-off or short-lived campaigns may have their value," says their vision statement for 2020, "but we are not that movement."² The spreadsheet, which was first circulated May 31, 2019, boasted more than 3,200 entries by years end.³

¹Catherine Wagley, "Museum Workers Across the Country Are Unionizing. Here's What's Driving a Movement That's Been Years in the Making," *artnet News*, November 25, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/market/union-museum-analysis-1714716>.

²Art and Museum Transparency, "A 20/20 Vision for Art Museum Transparency for 2020: Sharing, Analyzing, Moving Forward," *Medium*, December 9, 2019, <https://medium.com/@artandmuseumtransparency/a-20-20-vision-for-art-museum-transparency-for-2020-sharing-analyzing-moving-forward-3eef299cdea0>.

³The complete Arts and All Museums Salary Transparency spreadsheet can be found here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/14_cn3afoas7NhKvHWaFKqQGkaZS5rvL6DFxzGqXQa6o/edit#gid=0

While several union drives were already well underway, news of the spreadsheet flooded the cultural sector with a deluge of activism: at least five museums would hold successful union votes in 2019 alone, with even more taking to the street to protest unfair labor practices or assert their right to a fair contract.⁴ Indeed, in researching this movement it was almost impossible to keep up: new stories of union votes and union busting are coming out every day.

The Art and Museum Transparency’s collective hope has been to capitalize on this momentum and propel it forward into the new year. Its newest spreadsheet, entitled *Unions for All*, shares contact information for union representatives, compiles resources for starting the union discussion at your own institution, and offers a glossary of terms like “union busting” and “bargaining unit.”⁵ The collective has a robust Twitter presence, building community outrage and keeping stories of badly-behaved museums at the top of mind. The goal is clear: keep the movement alive, inspire collective action, and see if we can rebuild a broken field from the bottom up.

Yet, while the scale of this movement is certainly unprecedented, it’s nonetheless not the first of its kind. Instances of activism within the arts and cultural sector date back nearly a century to 1933, when a New York based collective of artists eventually known as the Artist’s Union first leveraged the power of collective bargaining into state relief for

⁴Beige Luciano-Adams, “The Art of Organizing,” *The American Prospect*, January 31, 2020, <https://prospect.org/api/content/dcd448ae-43aa-11ea-839c-1244d5f7c7c6/>.

⁵“Unions for All: Unionizing Museum and Arts Workers,” Art and Museum Transparency, Google Docs, accessed February 13, 2020, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1HSbS0Meaw5oLjbptC1pqFs9t6yIBKOD-vYDMhSMIuFU/edit?usp=embed_facebook.

unemployed artists.⁶ The next major breakthrough in cultural organizing came in 1971, when administrative staff at New York’s Museum of Modern Art organized the first-ever union of professional employees, negotiating a contract that would provide a wage increase, protection against termination without cause, and direct access to trustees and policy-making processes at the museum.⁷

While many believed the unionization at MoMA would fundamentally shift the tide of cultural organizing, in the decades that followed the arts and cultural industries stayed mostly the same: there were some small victories, some devastating losses, and a movement that would remain largely stalled for the next fifty years. The struggle of a creative working class for fair valuation of their labor is no trend indeed: it is a movement-in-the-making for nearly one hundred years.

The work of this year’s activists, then, is not just to build momentum to push the movement out of this still-embryonic stage, but also to reflect on its decades-long gestation. How can organizations like Arts and Museum Transparency ensure that they are “not that [ephemeral] movement” when this is the campaign they have inherited? Or when the streets of cultural activism are lined with the detritus of failed fronts, collapsed coalitions and weary workers? How will this time be different than before?

One major complication for this movement, both then and now, is the severe stratification of cultural workers across a variety of sectors and industries. While the Arts and Museum Transparency spreadsheet included entries from a variety of institutions, from arts behemoths like the Metropolitan Museum of Art to small archives, libraries,

⁶ Gerald M. Monroe, “The Artists Union of New York,” *Art Journal* 32, no. 1 (1972): 17–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/775601>.

⁷ Grace Glueck, “MOMA Gets a Taste of PASTA,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 1971, sec. Art Notes, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/09/26/archives/moma-gets-a-taste-of-pasta.html>.

and historic house museums, conversations driving the recent movement remain largely focused within the visual arts world. Of the twenty-seven unionized museums listed on the “Unions for All” spreadsheet, just four—the Museum of Tolerance, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, Milwaukee Public Museum, and association of Freedom Trail Foundation guides—include staff members specifically doing the work of historic interpretation.⁸

One might imagine that such institutions focused on the histories of labor, injustice and revolution would be leaders in such a movement. Yet, while a revolutionary spirit effervesces throughout the arts world, public historical workers lag curiously behind. That is not to suggest historical sites are fully absent from the movement. Indeed, a closer investigation into the years following the successful unionizing at MoMA finds a litany of loss and worker struggle among public historical institutions. While labor activism within the arts has been defined by stops and starts, the history of public historical organizing reveals a consistent culture of union busting and other manipulative, anti-union tactics on behalf of management.

Much of the labor performed at public historical institutions involve the perpetuation of “exceptionalist” narratives within American history, removing historical moments from their historiographical context to celebrate populist qualities like hard work and entrepreneurial spirit seen as “uniquely American.” Stories of worker struggle don’t fit neatly within such an exceptionalist framework, especially when the struggling workers are the very same ones working in service of a progressive and laudatory interpretation of American history and labor.

⁸ Art and Museum Transparency, “Unions for All.”

“A preoccupation with the exceptional elements of the American experience obscures those common patterns and processes that transcend national boundaries,” writes Eric Foner on the question of “American exceptionalism,” “most notably the global expansion of capitalism in the 19th and 20th centuries and its political and ideological ramifications.”⁹ Here, Foner problematizes an argument long used by scholars to perpetuate the exceptionalist characterization of the United States and its development. The argument goes something like this: If, as Marxism suggests, the inevitable trajectory of all capitalist societies is towards a tipping point of social revolution, why is there no socialism in the United States? Answers to the question tend to cite the unique democratic conditions under which the republic was first formed: with equality for all inscribed into the nation’s founding document, what need would there be for revolution?

A similar question can then be posed from the purview of public history: nearly fifty years after art museum workers took to the street in protest, why has there been no public historic revolution in the United States? And how, shaped by a genealogy of exceptionalism and pre-industrial nostalgia, might the very conditions under which public history first developed be hindering its progress?

This thesis aims to understand the particular needs of public historical workers within the context of the recent movement. Why, I ask, has organizing within the public historical field, more so than the visual arts, been defined by resistance, frustration and failure? And while a crucial part of propelling this movement into the next decade will include building a broad coalition of united cultural workers, I hope that the creation of a sort of typology for public historical labor within the movement can actually contribute to

⁹ Eric Foner, “Why is There No Socialism in the United States?”, *History Workshop*, no. 17 (1984): 76, www.jstor.org/stable/4288545.

this cause. While indeed we need to focus on the development of a unifying “creative class consciousness,” instilling solidarity throughout a diverse group of workers must include the acknowledgement of differing potentialities and challenges within each field. Collective action within the arts is a movement more than fifty years in the making; for public history, the fight has barely begun.

To analyze the various forces that have defined the progress of public historical labor activism thus far, this thesis focuses on four features that have shaped (and possibly hindered) the field: the historical institution, museum leadership, workers themselves, and the visiting public. I have spoken with individuals involved with union drives at multiple institutions across the country, whether such an effort was successful, is still in progress, or was swiftly busted by administration. Further, I look to media and scholarly coverage of successful and failed unionization attempts over the last thirty years to start and create a picture of union involvement in public history thus far.

Chapter One outlines the historiography of heritage tourism and interpretation to highlight the tenuous role of historical interpreters throughout the rise of cultural display and the heritage industry. This chapter demonstrates how the public historical laborer is simultaneously a producer and consumer of history who’s internalizing of institutional narratives, which have largely ignored worker struggle, has ultimately impacted both the history we interpret but also make.

Chapter Two compares and contrasts the history of state patronage for cultural institutions to investigate the differing ways that structures of power represent themselves within arts and history museums. Such funding models from both public and private

sources have shaped the way workers see themselves and museum management, navigating one of the few workspaces where such massive disparities of wealth can exist under one roof.

In Chapter Three, I investigate particularities within the public historical field that reduce solidarity among frontline staff and allow for a consistent exploitation of the worker's passion and personal investment within the work. This includes the complication of public history's focus on cultivating 'shared authority' with source communities that may have less investment in waging a war for cultural labor rights.

Finally, Chapter Four assembles research into the contemporary public perspective on union members to examine the way that conceptions of unions—and a fear that they might undermine the trustworthiness and authenticity of museums—has obstructed the recognition of a need for activism within the field.

CHAPTER 2

THE PERFORMANCE OF PROGRESS

“Explore the place where America’s can-do spirit inspires you to go out and get it done,” advertises the website for The Henry Ford, a sprawling, 250-acre history complex in Dearborn, Michigan, founded—at least at the time of its 1929 opening—by the most powerful and respected industrialist in the country.¹⁰ Likely created in response to media backlash against Ford’s assertion in 1914 that “history is more or less bunk,” The Henry Ford (which today includes the outdoor Greenfield Village and indoor Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation, among other offerings) features Ford’s collection of Americana spread throughout recreations from disparate periods of American history: from Thomas Edison’s lab and the Wright Brothers’ workshop to a restoration of Ford’s own childhood home. And after all, as the “History” section of The Henry Ford website assures its readers, “Henry Ford never really believed that history is bunk.”¹¹

Greenfield Village, the website insists, was created instead to celebrate the spirit of ordinary, working people; it was the history of kings and generals that Ford believed “bunk.” Here, Ford could simultaneously celebrate American progress while waxing sentimental about a long-lost American past. As Jessie Swigger notes in her 2014 ethnography of the site, “*History is Bunk*”, investigations into the display of history at Greenfield Village have long revealed how Ford’s faith in hard work and idealization of

¹⁰“Visit The Henry Ford | Museum & Attractions,” The Henry Ford, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.thehenryford.org/visit/>.

¹¹“Henry Ford: Collector – The Henry Ford,” The Henry Ford, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.thehenryford.org/history-and-mission/henry-ford-collector/>.

American innovation permeate the site's programming and interpretation.¹² Swigger further contributes to Greenfield Village's historiography through an analysis not just of how history Ford's personal views on the past shape how history functions at the site, but also how it is consumed by visitors (of which there were more than 1.8 million in 2019), and how both this production and consumption continues to impact how present administrators carry out the site's educational mission.¹³

But what about those who serve on the frontline of this educational war fought for the history of the everyman? At the Henry Ford, positions such as Presenters and Guest Services Representatives must stand on the border between consumption and production, educators and peddlers of Henry Ford's romantic past. And it's not just this ideological balancing act that makes the work demanding. A current job opening for the role of 'Presenter' at Greenfield Village requires that applicants have "basic skills in cooking, gardening, textile production, and fire building/safety" as well as a "willingness to take on any necessary task even those that mean getting dirty". And as the listing notes that Presenters "may work around coal and wood smoke, animals and machinery," getting dirty seems likely.¹⁴

If, as Swigger suggests, The Henry Ford as an institution is philosophically shaped by the man himself, how might Ford's worldviews be impacting not just the site's

¹²Jessie Swigger, *History Is Bunk* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk0x6.

¹³Sarah Rahal, "Henry Ford Museum Attendance Spikes in 2019 with Nearly 2M Visitors," *Detroit News*, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/wayne-county/2020/01/15/henry-ford-museum-attendance-spikes-2019-nearly-2-m-visitors/4478096002/>.; Swigger, *History Is Bunk*, 9.

¹⁴"Job Postings - Careers - The Henry Ford," The Henry Ford, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.thehenryford.org/about/employment/job-postings/?category=Guest+Relations>.

interpretive flesh but the very institutional lifeblood that pulses throughout the whole historical organism?

According to self-reported salary data from 2016, the pay for getting dirty at Greenfield Village is an average base wage of \$9/hour.¹⁵ For president Patricia E. Mooradian, on the other hand, a reported annual salary of \$448,330 in 2016 rounds out to an estimated \$215 per hour.¹⁶ In recent years, wealth disparities far less extreme within cultural institutions have inspired unprecedented levels of labor activism within the cultural sphere. Why not at The Henry Ford?

There could be any number of reasons why frontline staff at an organization like The Henry Ford choose not to unionize: perhaps the institution is too fragmented for collective bargaining, or low wages have created minimal buy-in and retention among staff. Perhaps talk of unionizing has been long percolating among workers in secret but hasn't yet gone public. Perhaps organizing was discussed long ago but fizzled due to factors such as high staff turnover and burnout. Perhaps it's simply a reflection of a broader decrease in union participation across all industries in recent years.¹⁷

Among all this theorizing, one notable fact can't be ignored: Henry Ford detested unions.

¹⁵“The Henry Ford Historical Presenter Hourly Pay,” Glassdoor, accessed February 13, 2020, https://www.glassdoor.com/Hourly-Pay/The-Henry-Ford-Historical-Presenter-Hourly-Pay-E346888_D_KO15,35.htm.

¹⁶ “Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax: The Edison Institute Inc.” (Internal Revenue Service, 2016), Guidestar.com.

¹⁷ Eli Rosenberg, “Workers Are Fired up. But Union Participation Is Still on the Decline, New Statistics Show.,” *Washington Post*, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/01/22/workers-are-fired-up-union-participation-is-still-decline-new-statistics-show/>.

Ford's distaste for unions is well-documented. Although employees of the Ford Motor Company eventually joined the United Auto Workers union in 1941, Ford repeatedly insisted the company would never recognize the union; he even created his own subservient union, the Ford Brotherhood of America, Inc., which required members to sign a pledge of confidence in the company.¹⁸ If Ford's anti-union views can be seen as a virus spreading through the bloodstream, how might the organization and the labor that perpetuates it become infected?

In the last decade or so, academics have begun to investigate the state of public historical labor within popular heritage sites, finding that frustrations like low pay, precarious employment and job stagnancy are more the rule than the exception within the field.¹⁹ The Henry Ford is just one institution among many that represents the massive pay disparity and tentative employment conditions common within the cultural sphere, with its own historiography and peculiarities that may be impacting how frontline workers conceive of their own labor.

It is difficult, probably impossible, to study why something *doesn't* happen. But it's hard to ignore the curious pattern: while ebullient newspaper headlines in the past year announce a sort of cultural socialist revolution and digital arts collectives boast the

¹⁸ Howard P. Segal, "Unionization," in *Recasting the Machine Age*, Henry Ford's Village Industries, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 75–80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk855.13>.

¹⁹This research has typically taken the form of ethnographies executed at these cultural sites, such as Cathy Stanton's work at Lowell National Historical Park, Amy Tyson at Historic Fort Snelling and Eric Gable and Richard Handler at Colonial Williamsburg. See: Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment*, Public History in a Postindustrial City (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk6rg.10>., Amy M. Tyson, *The Wages of History: Emotional Labor on Public History's Front Lines* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/22924>., and Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Duke University Press, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822398523>.

moment as “a movement, not a trend,” public historical institutions lag behind.²⁰ Of an ever-growing list of unionized cultural institutions, sites dedicated explicitly to the interpretation of history make up just a small percentage.²¹ Yet an investigation into the history of any number of these sites reveals its own troubling trend: from talk about organizing that never gets off the ground to insidious and overt patterns of anti-union sentiment from museum administrators, the story of collective organizing within the public historical field is one deeply incompatible with the kind of forward-marching history of the so-called everyman interpreted at The Henry Ford.

While the recent union fervor— and with it, stories of union busting and stalled negotiations— extends beyond public history and to the broader cultural field, this chapter aims to better understand public history’s particular role in the current movement of cultural labor activism by going straight to the source: history itself. How has the evolution of public historical work been shaped by the very history its labor produces? And if these viral features that stymie organizing are endemic to many history organizations, how do we stop the infection from spreading?

²⁰ Elizabeth A. Harris and Robin Pogrebin, “Inside Hushed Museum Hallways, a Rumble Over Pay Grows Louder,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 2019, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/22/arts/museum-pay-unions.html>. ; “Museum Workers Across the Country Are Unionizing. Here’s What’s Driving a Movement That’s Been Years in the Making,” artnet News, November 25, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/market/union-museum-analysis-1714716>. ; Art + Museum Transparency, “A 20/20 Vision for Art + Museum Transparency for 2020: Sharing, Analyzing, Moving Forward,” Medium, December 9, 2019, <https://medium.com/@artandmuseumtransparency/a-20-20-vision-for-art-museum-transparency-for-2020-sharing-analyzing-moving-forward-3eef299cdea0>.

²¹“Unions for All: Unionizing Museum and Arts Workers,” Google Docs, accessed February 13, 2020, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1HSbS0Meaw5oLjbptC1pqFs9t6yIBKOD-vYDMhSMIuFU/edit?usp=embed_facebook.

The ways in which public historical work and the institutions where this work is done fits within the current surge of labor activism begin to reveal themselves when one traces the genealogy of labor involved in what Bella Dicks calls “cultural display.”²² In particular, the evolution of work within the heritage industry, where intersections of history, tourism and urban renewal help to highlight the ways that the relationship of culture and capitalism is more symbiotic than parasitic.

According to John F. Sears, the rise of the tourist industry in the United States was inevitable. It was the result, he argues, of a strong religious tradition within the country that predisposed Americans to seek out spaces of the sublime, combined with the need to create a national identity from scratch.²³ Spaces of divinity and beauty like Niagara Falls, which seemed evidence of God’s presence, became popular tourist destinations for a genteel class with the time and means to travel. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that a battlefield like Gettysburg, where a major national drama had played out, played a similar role. Early guidebooks even compared the two sites, suggesting the battlefield would attract visitors the same way natural wonders did: it was a pilgrimage, and these spaces were shrines.²⁴ As rail travel improved and became more affordable for the masses, visitation grew, and an industry quickly arose: the pilgrimage had become profitable.

²²Bella Dicks, *Culture on Display* (Berkshire, United Kingdom: McGraw-Hill Education, 2004), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/templeuniv-ebooks/detail.action?docID=287810>.

²³John F. Sears, *Sacred Places : American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 6.

²⁴Jim Weeks, *Gettysburg : Memory, Market, and an American Shrine* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Almost immediately after the dust had settled on the fighting at Gettysburg, the rush to memorialize and commemorate began. As the initial wave of monument-building died down, former construction workers found ways to continue making a living from the battlefield, regaling tourists with stories they had heard from veterans after the war. The fact that they weren't eyewitnesses or professional historians didn't matter much: they provided a much-needed humanity to the cold, stone monuments and empty fields.²⁵

Indeed, for those working at Gettysburg in the late 19th century, it was probably better not to be a professional historian. The field had only recently become truly professionalized, and national history was being torn in two: between the restrictive, ivory tower of the academy and a more grassroots form of history as populist and patriotic. These early interpreters, Cathy Stanton notes, straddled this divide, "between the living and the dead; between well-educated elites and those who were closer to manual labor or to working the land; between the state and various publics; between the firsthand memories of veterans, the curiosity of civilians, and the different authority of historians."²⁶ And though "applied" or public history wouldn't become fully defined as a field until the late twentieth century, a growing affinity for displaying culture through the interpretation or performance of localized "tribal" history created an expanding history market.²⁷ By the end of the 19th century, the growing popularity of historical pageants, theatrical performances representing local history or folklore, and the increase of urban settlement houses for the inculcation of culture into immigrant communities had created a

²⁵Weeks, *Gettysburg*, 75.

²⁶Cathy Stanton, "Displaying the Industrial: Toward a Genealogy of Heritage Labor," *Labor* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 155, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15476715-7269374>.

²⁷ Rebecca Conard, *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History*, (Iowa City : University of Iowa Press, c2002), 3-4.

number of opportunities to make money from history work.²⁸ Communities looking to mount a historical pageant, for instance, were expected to budget extra for the hiring of a professional pageant-master, which could cost hundreds to well over a thousand dollars.²⁹

Nostalgia and public remembrances of local history were more important than ever in a rapidly changing world. Modernity created uncertainty and a desire to return to a past more sensical and grounded. Industrialization was both the problem and solution: there was unease, but growing mechanization also meant there was more time for going back in time. Cathy Stanton traces the rise of the heritage industry directly to the beginning of industrialization, as a growing mass of Americans had the disposable time and income for travel, the experiences they sought were those which would help them to make sense of the changing world.³⁰ “As capitalism has evolved,” she writes, “these leisure-time pursuits have assumed greater and greater social and economic importance, to the point that they have now become industries and commodities in themselves. And so in postindustrial societies, a curious elaboration has developed. People now visit industrial work sites themselves as tourists or or educational activity- a ritual designed to span some of the many discontinuities created by the restructuring of postindustrial societies.”³¹

The expanding tourist industry and commodification of experiences related to history and heritage did not go unnoticed by the United States government. As the

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry : The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 116-117.

³⁰Stanton, “Displaying the Industrial: Toward a Genealogy of Heritage Labor” 156.

³¹Stanton, “Rituals of Reconnection”, 173.

country entered a depression, there became clear economic benefits to solidifying the labor of these cultural intermediaries through a top-down approach to heritage preservation.³² In 1935, the federal government asserted explicitly for the first time the belief that preservation was a governmental duty with the passage of the Historic Sites Act, declaring that it was now national policy to “preserve for public use historic sites, buildings and objects of national significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States.”³³ Among developing a public education program, authorization of a nationwide survey to earmark sites for preservation and the promise to erect tablets to mark these sites, the act also “[made] necessary investigations and researches in the United States relating to particular sites, buildings, or objects to obtain true and accurate historical and archaeological facts and information...”.³⁴ Historians had a new and crucial role to play as seekers of truth. And they now had the resources to do so on the government’s payroll.

The rise of heritage tourism gave individuals the opportunity to make sense of their role in a changing world, and the federal government didn’t want to miss the chance to help guide the public through their *ennui*. The government would select sites they deemed important in constructing the story they wanted to tell, and employed cultural intermediaries like historians, tour guides, and educators to tell the public why they mattered. And it wasn’t only the federal government looking to benefit from the growing history industry, but also industry itself; like the battlefield interpreters at Gettysburg

³²Cathy Stanton, “The Past as Public Good: The US National Park Service and ‘Cultural Repair’ in Post-Industrial Places,” in *People and Their Pasts: Public History Today*, ed. Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean, (Basingstoke [England] ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 60.

³³ Department of the Interior, “Historic Sites Act,” Pub. L. No. 292, 666 (1935).

³⁴*Ibid.*

rushing in to turn a site of slaughter into a shrine, spaces of preindustrial massacre were imbued with new life in the form of factory tours, where smiling tour guides brought humanity to the cold steel of the new world. "[G]uides performed crucial affective labor for their employers," Stanton notes, "navigating the territory between visitors and the factory floor and between controlled corporate narratives and widespread public uncertainty about the changes taking place in an increasingly industrialized world."³⁵

As the factory tour grew in popularity, many companies used current or former employees (or their descendants) as interpreters, legitimizing the experience and nurturing a common bond of working-class pride. Just behind the veneer of cheerful human stories from the factory floor, however, was the opportunity for companies to now control public perception by making history part of their brand.³⁶ And despite many of these factory tours being led by employees, workers themselves were mostly absent from view. The product being made was the central focus, the factory a machine for its production, and the interpreter a synecdochic representation proxy for an imagined mass of smiling, subservient workers.

The factory tour and corporate museums had revealed how effective consumer faith could be in inspiring public history work, and it would be seen that the inverse was true as well. In the postwar years, Americans increasingly saw it as their duty to invest in the nation's economy, and thus a good citizen was becoming synonymous with a good consumer. And what better way was there for a consumer/citizen to invest in the country than by patronizing its history? By the late 20th century, tourists were not just seeking

³⁵Stanton, "Displaying the Industrial: Toward a Genealogy of Heritage Labor", 158.

³⁶Conard, *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History*, 161. ; Carolyn L. Kitch, *Pennsylvania in Public Memory: Reclaiming the Industrial Past*, (Penn State Press, 2012) 121-124.

meaning in an ambiguous world; they were looking for something to do, and somewhere to spend their money.³⁷ Shifting practices in advertising—which were moving away from mass culture and towards a segmented approach to the market based on appealing towards the individual interests of various consumer “tribes”—also supported this transformation of tourism from cultural to recreational experience. At Gettysburg, this meant embracing the fact that not every American wanted to tour the site in hushed reverence: some came for professional historical knowledge, others for reenactments, ghost tours, or an undemanding weekend away. By the 1970’s, Gettysburg was prepared to appeal to them all.³⁸

This shift from performing culture in a controlled setting to selling history across diverse markets was representative of the broader postindustrial landscape of the 1980s and beyond, which was shifting away from a goods-based economy to one centered on the production of services and knowledge. The job of interpreting history had indeed become a service to be rendered, and as professional historians with limited job opportunities in the academic market pushed into the field, this typically meant that industrial employees and eyewitnesses to history were out of a job.

As scholars like Amy Tyson and Cathy Stanton have demonstrated through their field research, public historical laborers in the 21st century often find themselves confronted with low pay, precarious employment and few opportunities for upward mobility. Stanton argues that it has always been this way: “the ... class positions of contemporary cultural workers involved in producing industrial heritage may be

³⁷Swigger, *History Is Bunk*, 126.

³⁸Weeks, *Gettysburg*, 178.

shifting,” she writes, but “contingency, opportunism, and fluidity in this type of labor have actually been the norm over time.”³⁹ How do public historical laborers, standing on this divide between the production and consumption of heritage—and the inevitable feedback loop it creates—step back long enough to make their own?

The convoluted role of public historical labor may also be understood by looking at how spaces transform into heritage, and the ways in which historical interpreters, particularly within industrial history, come to embody a sort of historical motion sickness: the appearance that things are moving forward when in fact they’re standing still. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, “the inability of sites to tell their own story authorizes the interpretation project itself.”⁴⁰ How might those who take on the work of telling the story be unwittingly imposing a narrative of progress even where one might not yet exist?

In his exploration of the historicization of industrial heritage, Michael Frisch highlights the variety of stakeholders who might be invested in the project of cultural revitalization through heritage display. They include: displaced workers, historical caretakers, an economic development community looking to prevent postindustrial destruction, social groups seeking change through commemoration, and the state. Yet a public historical worker often simultaneously represents all of the perspectives above: they were once displaced workers and are now largely history professionals, their work

³⁹Stanton, “Displaying the Industrial: Toward a Genealogy of Heritage Labor”, 165.

⁴⁰Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture : Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), <http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=6908&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

may be funded by the state as a means of economic redevelopment (as was the case in the former mill town turned National Historic Park of Lowell, Massachusetts), and they themselves may be social activists looking to make change by serving the site's educational mission.⁴¹

Philip Feifan Xie defines industrial heritage tourism as a potential “public relations tool to counteract public prejudices against industrial areas in decline.”⁴² But what is the process of taking an industrial area in decline and turning it into a heritage space? And how might the performance of history within that space be impacted by the conflicting interests of interpreter, patron and institution?

According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the process of repackaging active history into present past requires a transvaluation of space that resembles the transforming of culture into folklore. The act of transvaluation, she argues, suggests an admittance of error: cultures reform themselves when they are embarrassed by their old traditions and seek change, and heritage is the exoskeleton that gets left behind.⁴³ With the legacy of industrialization—and the destruction it left behind as manufacturing moved outside of the United States—uncertain, spaces of industrial heritage attempt to establish a legacy before one gets the chance to be made. Since the actual heritage, or lived memory, of these sites tend to encompass only a niche audience, the interpretation of labor-as-heritage must be extrapolated outward to have value (and thus consumer possibilities) for a broad public.

⁴¹ Michael Frisch, “De-, Re-, and Post-Industrialization: Industrial Heritage as Contested Memorial Terrain” *Journal of Folklore Research* 35(3) (1998): 242-244.

⁴² Philip Feifan Xie, *Industrial Heritage Tourism*, (Channel View Publications, 2015), 4.

⁴³ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 161.

Rather than focus on the stories of devastation and loss in empty factories and crumbling neighborhoods, industrial heritage has become a celebration of the American values of hard work and entrepreneurship. And the stakes here are high. If we confront the very real devastation of the postindustrial landscape, we inadvertently suggest that the legacy of capitalism is one of failure; that the story of industry is over, and it doesn't have a happy ending.⁴⁴ Instead of this admittance, interpretation of industry tends to pitch capitalism as a progressive force, and deindustrialization the natural and expected next step in the evolution of society. It's a message that's easy to swallow, suggesting to visitors that *it was good then, it's better now, and that's how it's meant to be*. "The shift from political and economic choice to such naturalized and historicized conceptions of societal movement," Frisch writes, "lend great force to views that sentimentalize the past, that distance it and its dynamics from contemporary choices and options."⁴⁵

Striking a balance of interpretation in former industrial spaces has become crucial to the way culture is displayed, and thus how visitors are attracted, at a particular site. If successful, spaces ravished by deindustrialization could be given new life as a representation of itself, a failure of the capitalist system hiding in plain sight.⁴⁶ In Bella Dicks' formulation of cultural display, the ability to revitalize city life through the representation of culture, making a space "visitable" and promoting consumption while there, is key to economic success of these areas. Yet, like the government's quest for the

⁴⁴Kitch, *Pennsylvania in Public Memory*, 154. ; Frisch, "De-, Re-, and Post-Industrialization: Industrial Heritage as Contested Memorial Terrain", 245.

⁴⁵Frisch, "De-, Re-, and Post-Industrialization", 247.

⁴⁶Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 151.

“true” past, the idea of “culture” is constructed through control of information and knowledge through display.⁴⁷

This kind of informational control is central to the practice of urban renewal in the postindustrial landscape, where revitalization tends to take the form of a kind of re-appropriation of scenery. Like the transvaluation that takes place from history to heritage, the devastation of formerly industrial spaces is concealed through the transformation of “gritty” to “authentic”; from ruin to bohemia. What was once mass culture is packaged and sold as something else, a palatable and sentimentalized version of the past that you can easily live within: for a price.⁴⁸

One could think of urban renewal, then, as a sort of privatizing of the cultural commons, in which culture and history make up the raw materials of primitive accumulation, carving up mass culture, privatizing it as personal heritage, and selling it back to the public for a profit.⁴⁹ This repackaging of history was not unlike the historical pageantry of the 19th century, but disguised: where, once, if you had the capital and culture for displaying, you would hire a professional pageant master to perform the past for the public, today a massive nonprofit organization or museum is tasked with the work. Though the field has grown increasingly professionalized, cultural display remains a performance, and those laboring within it have come to be seen as actors.

“Worker hardship makes sense only as a struggle of the past, not the present, within industrial heritage narratives whose plotline is one of inevitable progress,” writes

⁴⁷Dicks, *Culture on Display*, 7.

⁴⁸Richard Lloyd, “Neo-Bohemia: Art and Neighborhood Redevelopment in Chicago,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 24, no. 5 (December 1, 2002): 517–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9906.00141>.

⁴⁹Catherine Cameron, “The Unnatural History of Heritage: What’s the Future for the Past?,” *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 5, no. 3 (August 1, 2010): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2010.505289>.

Carolyn L. Kitch, noting in turn that organized labor doesn't often appear in heritage interpretations, unless part of a historical drama with a definitive resolution.⁵⁰ If our historical institutions haven't yet found a way to make sense of worker struggle within a broader narrative of progress, it seems unlikely they will recognize that struggle within their own walls.

In the centuries-long genealogy of the museum, the intersection between what was once seen as a highly restrictive and elitist institution with the modern tourism industry is a fairly recent development.⁵¹ As history moved outside the walls of the academy and heritage bought up for consumption, museums and historic sites needed to find new ways to remain competitive within the cultural marketplace. Spaces of difficult history, stories that challenged many American's conceptions of the country's progress and exceptionalism, were an especially hard sell. When marketing the history of a space itself wasn't enough to attract visitors, many museums sought to sell cultural capital: a practice in line with the nation's late-20th century turn towards neoliberalism.⁵² In a free market economy, citizenship wasn't assumed, it was made by those with the entrepreneurial spirit needed for true self-improvement. In order to succeed, museums would have to prove themselves as spaces where this self-capitalization could occur. Establishing set lessons or expectations for visitors in these terms seemed like indoctrination. The new museum would offer history a la carte.

⁵⁰ Kitch, *Pennsylvania in Public Memory*, 165-166.

⁵¹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 137.

⁵² Rina Kunu and Nadine M. Kalin, "Participating in the Neoliberal Art Museum," *Studies in Art Education* 57, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 39-52.

The result was the participatory museum. As museums attempted more and more to recede from the veneer of authority, space was increasingly made to incorporate visitor voices and reactions into the display and interpretation of history itself. Touted as a revolution in museology that would engage and educate a new generation of museum attendees, the participatory museum offered additional benefits, as well, allowing museums to demonstrate public and cultural value as spaces of dialogue while distancing themselves from the actual educational process. “Now [by the late 20th century] the unfading quest for recapturing the battle narrative could triumph free of larger meaning,” Jim Weeks writes of Gettysburg’s neoliberal turn, “and each individual could find the sacred in a personal encounter with the past.”⁵³ As history itself had become the museum’s primary commodity, visitors unsatisfied with their purchase could easily send it back. And the frontline public historian, like the exasperated waiter whose tip suffers because of a mistake made in the kitchen, would become the face of consumer dissatisfaction.

So accustomed to the liminal space they work within, public historical laborers often don’t consider their own position as consumers of history. Like a game of *Whisper Down the Lane*, the stories of history are whispered from the museum to interpreter and onward, shifting along the way. Frontline interpreters consume the museum’s message, then— as any good service sector employee should— they tailor it to the needs of the visitor. “Teaching history to the public is a social encounter with rules of its own,” writes Eric Gable and Richard Handler in their ethnography of Colonial Williamsburg, “some of

⁵³Weeks, *Gettysburg*, 222.

which are imposed on the situation by the museum (its values and expectations), and some by what the visitors bring to it."⁵⁴ In the same study, they note that employees of Colonial Williamsburg would often modify their production of history depending on how visitors were responding. After all, while employees had near-free range to talk about whatever history they chose, the worst thing they could do—they were repeatedly told—was be rude to a guest.⁵⁵

While preservation suggests the “what” of public memory, and frontline workers hoped their mediation could offer a “why”, the contemporary neoliberal museum offers visitors the opportunity to determine the what and why on their own. From former industrial sites to slave plantations, tenement houses and sites of terrorist attacks, visitors to the neoliberal museum can pick and choose which histories have personal salience, and interpreters (who can never be rude to the guests) must step back to create space for this individual, entrepreneurial project. "In their own increasingly entrepreneurial and precarious pursuit of creative labor," Stanton writes, “these workers may—as factory tour guides have long done—help audiences connect to an ideal of industrial capitalism that may symbolically help to compensate for its turbulence and the unforgiving logic of profit-seeking.”⁵⁶

While many museums claim to be radical spaces for discussions of structural change, with progressive education missions to boot, the production of history at these sites tends to stop short of inspiring real, radical change. While the performance of

⁵⁴ Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*, 13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁶ Stanton, “Displaying the Industrial: Toward a Genealogy of Heritage Labor”, 166.

history at these sites, through programming and interpretation, offers visitors the chance to choose what and how to consume the past, frontline workers must strike a balance between “good history” and “good customer service.” In the process, interpreters may seem to endorse and reproduce the very structures the museum purports to break down through their particular type of cultural education.

The work of interpretation and other types of cultural intermediation carries a muddled legacy into the 21st century: frontline employees are all at once educators, historical caretakers, service workers, performers and producers of culture, embodying the “contested terrain of heritage” all within one job that often pays barely above minimum wage. The many different stakes for individuals drawn to the profession, as seen in the historiography outlined above, has fractured our understanding of cultural labor and made it difficult for both those on the ground, in leadership and the public to conceptualize this work as part of a general “working class.” It is within this framework that the following chapters will consider the development, opportunities and challenges of the current moment.

Understanding the ways in which the contemporary museum has evolved alongside a legacy of national cultural display, and those laboring within it, can provide crucial insight into the potential trajectory of the recent union wave. Stories of both successful and attempted union drives in cultural organizations over the last twenty years reveal some common trends: administrative pushback, stalled negotiations, and the use of anti-union rhetoric are just a few. The genealogy laid out in this chapter may help reveal why, at our historic institutions, progress is a performance. We appear to be moving, but we’re standing perfectly still.

CHAPTER 3

US VS. THEM

In 1971, the Professional and Administrative Staff of the Museum of Modern Art, going by the acronym PASTA, marched out of their museum and onto the streets, picket signs in hand. The museum stayed open. Strikers argued peacefully with visitors as tourist families stepped across the picket line. By the time negotiations were complete, PASTA had won a two-year contract promising increased wages, no arbitrary firings, and direct access to trustees, policy and leadership decisions. As official members of the Distributive Workers of America, PASTA had officially become the first self-organized union of professionals (in contrast to maintenance or service workers). It seemed like a movement was brewing.⁵⁷

“Reflecting settlements made in the past by both blue-collar and academic personnel,” wrote *New York Times* reporter Grace Glueck of the 1971 union victory, “it should give pause to die hard trustee boards, since it is bound to have powerful repercussions at museums across the country.”⁵⁸ In the decade that followed, economics journals and museum management handbooks sought to ring the alarm bells about the approaching change.⁵⁹ But the change never came.

MoMA went on strike two years later, in 1973, and then not again until 2000. That would become the last major strike within the New York cultural scene until, just

⁵⁷Grace Glueck, “MOMA Gets a Taste of PASTA,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 1971, sec. Art Notes, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/09/26/archives/moma-gets-a-taste-of-pasta.html>.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹Hyman R. Faine, “Unions and the Arts,” *American Economic Review* 62, no. 2 (May 1972): 70.; Kevin Moore, ed., “Museum People. The Special Problems of Personnel Management in Museums and Historical Agencies,” in *Museum Management* (Psychology Press, 1982), 220–127.

last year, staff at the New Museum of Contemporary Art walked out. And it's not to suggest that organizing did not happen in the years between. Small pockets within the cultural sector, such as museum security staff, had unionized, and elsewhere—such as at the Chicago Children's Museum, where a union vote in 1998 had failed by a wide margin—talk of organizing had bubbled up only to dissolve shortly thereafter.⁶⁰ Certainly, the recent wave of cultural organizing, which has seen more than seven museums stage successful union drives in the last year, is unprecedented.

But why didn't this current union fervor catch on nearly fifty years ago, following PASTA's historic victory? Especially when demands for liveable wages, job stability and increased transparency continue to be at the forefront of this movement, almost half a century later?

Despite being lauded as the beginning of a major shift in perspectives of cultural labor, PASTA's groundbreaking formation of a professional union in 1971 appeared to be more a victory for the visual arts community than museums at large. “[The MoMA union is] a reminder that, despite the art world's emphasis on individualism and the difficulties of building solidarity among art workers, this had been possible—so it could be possible again,” commented Dana Kopel, an organizing committee member at the New Museum, which in 2019 joined the throngs of newly organized arts institutions. But where was the precedent for unionization at a historic site or museum with explicit historic focus? Did this movement really belong to all museum workers, or just artists?

⁶⁰Stephen Franklin, “Union Sees Potential at Museums,” *Chicagotribune.Com*, accessed January 30, 2020, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1998-12-26-9812260131-story.html>.

Emma, a Costumed Historical Tour Guide at a recently unionized historical organization, credits the revolutionary spirit of the history she interprets as part of the drive's success. "I think our effort to unionize was successful because we are a small shop of people who talk all day about revolution!" she writes, "[a]bout a small group of people who took on a huge powerful hierarchy."⁶¹ Yet, since the PASTA strike nearly fifty years ago, scores of history workers have struggled to unionize even at sites that interpret topics like revolution, liberty, labor, and the plight of the so-called "everyman".

Perhaps, as outlined in the previous chapter, it is the production of this history itself at these sites that complicates and hinders organizing within the public history field. Still, these organizations do not exist in a vacuum. Decisions about interpretation, programming, and the culture being performed are made, often by corporate board members or upper-management leaders that move in spheres far distant from the farms and historic houses populated by frontline employees. How does the huge and powerful hierarchy of museum leadership so often manage to stop revolutions before they even begin?

The genealogy of arts funding, particularly government patronage of the arts, follows a similar trajectory to the development of heritage tourism within the United States, though the threads connecting the arts, capital and cultural reproduction reveal themselves much more obviously within the visual arts than at historic interpretation-focused institutions.

⁶¹Emma, email to the author, February 10, 2020.

Cultural reproduction, as outlined by Pierre Bourdieu in 1973's *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change*, refers to the "transmission from generation to generation of accumulated information" related to the social and cultural norms of a society.⁶² Unlike ethnologists before him, however, Bourdieu notes that despite past belief that reproduction functioned similarly within each social class in order to produce a shared cultural heritage for all of society, things like "theatre, concert, and, above all, museum attendance ... are sufficient reminder that the inheritance of cultural wealth which has been accumulated and bequeathed by previous generations only really belongs...to those endowed with the means of appropriating it for themselves."⁶³ How had museums, even those without prohibitive admissions costs, which were promoted as spaces for cultural sharing and celebration, become such exclusionary spaces?

Like heritage, the merging of art with mass culture by the mid-to-late 20th century may have been part of its undoing: with increased popularity for the visual arts had come a growing political salience. Just as the Historic Sites Act had consolidated federal control over the cultural reproduction of American heritage, state patronage of the arts justified governmental control of artists; once a relatively autonomous workforce and suddenly employed by the state, working towards a common goal.⁶⁴ Additionally, as Sharon Zukin notes, the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965 didn't just put artists to work: public patronage of the arts also encouraged faith in

⁶²Pierre Bourdieu, "The Role of the Educational System in the Reproduction of the Structure of the Distribution of Cultural Capital," in *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education*, ed. Richard Brown (Routledge, 1973), 72.

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 103.

political leaders, mobilized voters and (perhaps counterintuitively) actually mitigated social revolution by demonstrating a political commitment to satisfy the soul, promoting a conception of the state as a creator not of comfort, but beauty. In return, the state now had a relatively cheap and abeyant workforce, content just to be (at long last) paid for their labor.

Wealthy political and business leaders, moreover, now could kill two birds with one tax deduction, investing in expensive art that could boost their personal cultural capital within society while saving a tremendous amount in taxes by donating their pieces to nonprofit art museums. And the practice has by no means abated today; the more the middle class invested in the arts, the greater value for those possessing this cultural stock. “The funding model museums have now, it's effectively for rich people to sort of artwash some of their money and exchange it for social capital or prestige,” commented New Museum organizing committee member Dana Kopel earlier this year.⁶⁵

State power and control is no less salient in historical institutions, though it is perhaps more concealed: investment in history tends to become filtered through levels of interpretation and display, coated with a veneer of neutrality that allows for the tacit inculcation of ideas that help perpetuate the ideal of a citizenry rife with consumer-patriots. Within the visual arts, however, the relationship between monetary value and sociocultural capital is significantly more pronounced and has historically worked to the benefit of the wealthy: the nebulous nature of value within the art market allows a certain level of plausible deniability as art collectors over inflate estimates of their pieces’ worth,

⁶⁵Hazel Cills, “Does the Museum Model Work?,” *Jezebel*, January 2, 2020, <https://jezebel.com/does-the-museum-model-work-1840149191>.

which shelters them from taxation if donated to a nonprofit museum. And though a museum's tax-exempt status is supposed to be offered in exchange for providing a public service, a 2015 investigation conducted by the Senate Finance Committee uncovered at least eleven private foundations with questionably limited public access.⁶⁶

Among these organizations, and possibly the most brazen offender, was the Solow Art and Architecture Foundation, a registered nonprofit containing a collection of art valued at more than \$200 million, displayed in a “museum” with no public hours. And despite New York law stipulating that nonprofit organizations must have three or more board members, the Solow Art and Architecture Foundation has just two: the collection's owner, real estate magnate Sheldon Solow, and his son.⁶⁷

While this case may be exceptional, and certainly not all private art collections are built with nefarious intent, the growth of such spaces—that, at best, are used to consolidate and control the means of cultural reproduction and, at worst, function as mere shells for the hiding and hoarding of wealth—has created a number of institutions with much more focus on accumulating cultural capital than investing in staff advancement or retention. This has made such sites fertile soil for labor disputes to grow. In situations where the cost of such a dispute outweighs the benefit of a tax break, the real motives of these private collectors begin to break through.

When the Marciano Art Foundation opened in 2017, brothers Maurice and Paul Marciano, co-founders of fashion brand Guess, Inc., claimed to envision the space as “an

⁶⁶Erin Rubin, “A Nonprofit Museum with No Public Access: A Showy Extravagance with a Tax Exemption,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, April 25, 2018, Nonprofit News edition, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/nonprofit-museum-no-public-access-showy-extravagance-tax-exemption/>.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

incubator for artists”.⁶⁸ Whether the space was meant as mere tax shelter is less clear than in the Solow case: while the Marciano brothers are (like Solow and son) listed as director and president of the foundation with no other board members or trustees, the museum was open to the public, mounted solo shows by recognizable artists, and hired a staff of seventy part-time Visitor Services associates to take tickets and act as gallery guides.⁶⁹ But when the staff, who were paid Los Angeles’ minimum wage of \$14.25 per hour, voted to unionize, the Marciano brothers decided they would rather shut the whole museum down. The doors were closed, the entire visitor services staff laid off, and the Marciano Art Foundation remains, at the time of writing, with “no present plans to reopen.”⁷⁰ A pending class action lawsuit alleges that the Marciano brothers engaged in unfair labor practices by violating the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act, which requires notice before any mass layoffs resulting from the closure of a business.⁷¹

Although the Marciano brothers did not pay themselves a salary as president and director of the Marciano Art Foundation, it seems certain that the indignity of earning minimum wage in such an opulent environment (admission was free, yet tax records

⁶⁸Carolina A. Miranda, “Tax, Pay Issues Seen in Museum Closure; The Quick Shuttering of the Marciano Art Foundation Offers a Window into Inequity in a Rarefied World,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 2019, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/2312721138/D5B1BD0A96784192PQ/25?accountid=14270>.

⁶⁹Stacy Perman, “Inside the Marciano Art Foundation’s Spectacular Shutdown,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-02-16/la-et-cm-marciano-art-foundation-story-behind-the-closure>.

⁷⁰Miranda, “Tax, Pay Issues Seen in Museum Closure; The Quick Shuttering of the Marciano Art Foundation Offers a Window into Inequity in a Rarefied World.”

⁷¹Perman, “Inside the Marciano Art Foundation’s Spectacular Shutdown.”

report revenue of \$14.9 million in 2017) was a major motivation behind the staff's fatal union drive.⁷²

Museums may be one of few workplaces where such massive wealth disparity exists under one roof. Whereas other minimum wage jobs are typically found within companies with a more stratified hierarchy of power, where hourly workers infrequently (if ever) come into contact with those at the very top, museums place minimum wage workers in close proximity with higher-ups that make sometimes hundreds of thousands above their typical earnings. This disparity tends to be greatest within art museums, where the median pay for a CEO/President is \$123,000 per year (nearly double the median salary of \$68,634 for history museum CEO's, the lowest paid of all disciplines).⁷³ In Los Angeles, home to the Marciano Art Foundation, pay at a unionized museum like the Museum of Tolerance began at \$12-14 per hour for frontline staff, which, if working full-time (which most of these positions are not), would be a rough \$29,120 per year.⁷⁴ The highest paid employee, President and CEO Rabbi Marvin Hier, makes an annual salary of \$371,689.⁷⁵ At L.A.'s recently unionized Museum of Contemporary Art, frontline staff are paid the city's \$14.25 per hour minimum wage. Director Philippe Vergne makes \$833,179 every year: roughly \$400 per hour.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³American Alliance of Museums and New Knowledge Organization Limited, *2017 National Museum Salary Survey*, 2017.

⁷⁴This number represents frontline pay in 2018, at the time of signing their union contract. After signing, the contract immediately raised wages to \$14.25, building in guaranteed cost of living raises each year. The union contract can be found here: "Collective Bargaining Agreement Between Simon Wiesenthal Center, Inc., a California Nonprofit Public Benefit Corporation, d.b.a. Museum of Tolerance And AFSCME Local," April 5, 2018, AFSCME Local, <https://www.afscmelocal800.org/contract-museum-tolerance-2018-2022>.

⁷⁵"Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: The Simon Wiesenthal Center" (Internal Revenue Service, 2013), 990, CitizenAudit.org.

As museum interpretation shifted in favor of mass culture, consumption and display, the commitment of an over-qualified class of cultural workers, desperate for work in their field, became easily exploitable. A decade after the first professional museum union formed at the Museum of Modern Art, Renée Friedman suggested the now-tenuous hierarchy within cultural institutions would soon collapse. “The traditional relationship between museum management and staff is growing less stable as more and more employees become aware of the inequities in salaries and fringe benefits between jobs in museums and jobs in the business world,” she wrote in 1982.⁷⁶ Yet it is only within the past couple of years that we see this prediction beginning to come true: how did the crumbling infrastructure of museum management stand firm on such shaky ground for so long?

The display of history and cultural simulacrum help perpetuate the belief that, even as major generators of wealth, museums and those who run them are nonetheless doing the good and honest work of activists. Art museums receive acclaim for displaying the work of marginalized artists, while history museums mount radical exhibits in the name of social justice.⁷⁷ These moves help to obscure the massive wealth disparity by appealing to many museum workers’ desire to do good and impactful work. Yet, every so often, leadership at these museums will perform in a way that contradicts their personas as activists and philanthropists, devaluing frontline staff’s emotional labor and making injustices within the workplace become suddenly much clearer. A look at recently

⁷⁶Moore, “Museum People. The Special Problems of Personnel Management in Museums and Historical Agencies.”

⁷⁷Cills, “Does the Museum Model Work?”

unionized museums indeed reveals this common thread: when leadership breaks character, staff take to the streets.

At the Museum of Tolerance, the first museum to unionize in Los Angeles, the tipping point came when founder-CEO Rabbi Marvin Hier agreed to pray at President Trump's inauguration in 2017. "This is the work we're doing—anti-bigotry, anti-racism," said former MoT docent Josie Cha. "And what does Trump stand for? So of course we don't like it."⁷⁸ At New York's New Museum, founded in 1977 as a form of protest to the increased corporatization of art museums, the union drive came after announcing an \$89 million expansion.⁷⁹ And such protest-inspired union attempts are not restricted to major metropolitan areas nor are a recent phenomenon: in 1986, historic guides across a variety of sites within the Minnesota Historical Society attempted (unsuccessfully) to unionize after the announcement of a \$50 million History Center to be constructed in St. Paul.⁸⁰ At the Milwaukee Public Museum, the most visited museum in Wisconsin, unionized staff recently formed a picket line after management revealed their new proposed contract, which included no cost of living increases and a new mandatory program which would make the employee's health care premiums contingent on their success in a wellness-tracking program; all this after the announcement of a 2020 expansion estimated at \$100 million.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Beige Luciano-Adams, "The Art of Organizing," *The American Prospect*, January 31, 2020, <https://prospect.org/api/content/dcd448ae-43aa-11ea-839c-1244d5f7c7c6/>.

⁷⁹ Hazel Cills, "The New Museum's Union Resistance Contradicts Its Radical Inception," *Jezebel*, April 22, 2019, <https://jezebel.com/the-new-museums-union-resistance-contradicts-its-radica-1834054472>.

⁸⁰ Amy M. Tyson, *The Wages of History: Emotional Labor on Public History's Front Lines* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 56-58, <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/22924>.

⁸¹ Graham Kilmer, "Museum Would Monitor Workers' Health Choices," *Urban Milwaukee*, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2020/02/03/museum-would-monitor-workers-health-choices/>.

Funding sources have a huge influence on how workers perceive spending and wealth within their institutions. Sites like the Milwaukee Public Museum, which is actually a public-private institution, justify these extreme cost-saving measures by perpetuating an image of themselves as the archetype of a cash-strapped, publicly funded museum. This conceptualization becomes less salient, however, when \$100 million in private donations are raised for new construction.

Immediately after MoMA's historic movement in 1971, theorists sought to make sense of how cultural labor organizing might impact the funding model for such institutions. In *Unions and the Arts*, Hyman R. Faine noted that any dispute between management and unions in cultural institutions would ultimately be a zero sum game: while the public nature of the arts might imply public sentiment would be with the union, the 'marginal' status of the arts in daily life meant these unions had little leverage; unlike air traffic controllers or public transit workers, museums could close for strikes and life would still go on.⁸²

Faine instead proposed the idea of "cooperative organizing," which relied on an acknowledgement both from cultural workers and management that resources were in short supply, and that sourcing the funding necessary to satisfy both sides should be a collaborative effort. Moreover, Faine's proposal suggested that this additional funding should come from state support, creating a sort of cultural funding truss: management raises private funds to carry out the mission of their institution, frontline staff members perform the labor necessary to bring this mission to the public, and the public gives back in the form of state support for their work. "Such cooperative bargaining would shift the

⁸²Faine, "Unions and the Arts", 71.

present focus of the arts institutions from being 'private organizations' for which only the artists, management and some interested citizens are responsible," Faine wrote in 1972. "It would place the arts institutions in their proper locus in the cultural, social, even the economic life of the community. The responsibility for the direction, purpose, continuity, and the existence of arts institutions would become a 'public' rather than a 'private' concern."⁸³

Unfortunately, Faine's utopian vision never came to fruition. Today, there are at least ten private sites dedicated to historic interpretation that have mounted a union drive at some level, whether it was successful or ultimately failed; only two have greater public than private contributions.⁸⁴ Overall, the difference between public donations and government funding at these sites is an average of \$2.5 million, including major outliers like Philadelphia's Museum of the American Revolution, which receives nearly fourteen times more in private than public contributions.⁸⁵

⁸³*Ibid*, 77.

⁸⁴These institutions are: Plimoth Plantation, the Tenement Museum, the National Liberty Museum, the Museum of the American Revolution, the Freedom Trail Association of Guides, the Museum of Tolerance, Milwaukee Public Museum, Minnesota Historical Society and DuSable African American Museum. This list was compiled through a combination of news sources and personal interviews; there are likely many more cases of museums where union drives were busted or never got off the ground, leaving no public evidence of the movement behind.

⁸⁵"Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: The Simon Wiesenthal Center."; "Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax: The Edison Institute Inc." (Internal Revenue Service, 2016), Guidestar.com.; "Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: Plimoth Plnataation Inc." (Internal Revenue Service, 2017), ProPublica.; "Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: Lower East Side Tenement Museum" (Internal Revenue Service, 2017), ProPublica.; "Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: National Liberty Museum" (Internal Revenue Service, 2017), ProPublica.; "Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: Museum of the American Revolution" (Internal Revenue Service, 2017), ProPublica.; "Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: Milwaukee Public Museum Inc." (Internal Revenue Service, 2017), ProPublica.; "Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: Minnesota Historical Society" (Internal Revenue Service, 2017), ProPublica.; "Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: Freedom Trail Foundation Inc." (Internal Revenue Service, 2017), ProPublica.; "Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: DuSable Museum of African American History Inc." (Internal Revenue Service, 2017), ProPublica.

Cooperative organizing seems especially unlikely in this regard: it does not simply become a mutually beneficial relationship of workers, management and the public, but also wealthy donors with their own motivations for providing support. Often, that motivation is the opportunity for naming rights, which makes private support for construction projects a logical goal. Naturally, general operating funds are much less attractive to these donors. After all, you can't put your name on someone's livable wage.⁸⁶

The potential for cooperative bargaining becomes even more unlikely when one considers hierarchies of power within the museum, that creates distance in other ways, even for workers in close physical proximity. Frontline staff generally spend their days on the 'floor' of the museum or historic site, sometimes in costume and exposed to fluctuating weather conditions, while administrative staff sit together in offices removed from the museum's public space. Because guides are often responsible for covering desks or site positions throughout the day, they get few opportunities to attend meetings or inhabit administrative spaces. This departmentalized structure within museums helps create silos that ultimately benefit leadership, separating employees into different units (guest services, education, security, etc.) that minimizes feelings of collective solidarity among the workforce.

Many frontline staff members who were involved in organizing attempts at their institutions brought up the actions of management as a main reason behind unionizing, highlighting feelings of powerlessness, unequal treatment and imposed isolation. "The

⁸⁶Elizabeth A. Harris and Robin Pogrebin, "Inside Hushed Museum Hallways, a Rumble Over Pay Grows Louder," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2019, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/22/arts/museum-pay-unions.html>.

lowest paid at the organization absolutely felt like we were not listened to and were able to be pushed out or threatened, and thus why we should band together and unionize,” one employee said of their experience. “I think if the organization had seen us as people and appreciated us, unionization talks would not have been brought up.”⁸⁷ Emma, the Costumed Historical Tour Guide who helped to unionize her organization, noted that “there is a huge gap between office staff and guides, and the exacerbation of that gap was a huge point in why we unionized, it was very much us vs. them.”

Margaret Sanford, a former Museum Educator at Philadelphia’s National Liberty Museum, attempted to subvert the traditional hierarchy after taking complaints (which included low pay, demands to take on extra responsibilities with no according change in title or pay, and unstable hours) to her direct supervisor with no response. Sanford and two other part-time educators approached the Vice President following a morning meeting, presenting a letter that outlined their demands and suggested the possibility of creating an organizing committee if their concerns could not be addressed. A week later, management passed the proposed wage increase, but at a cost: part-time educators involved in the nascent organizing movement began to be scheduled without notice for one-on-one meetings with the Vice President and education supervisor. During these meetings, “we were told it was inappropriate to go above [the supervisor’s] head and embarrass him. We were all told a raise didn’t seem fair but “[they] were given no choice” and that there would be strict repercussions if they discovered any more meetings discussing this. They said it wasn’t professional to know each other’s salaries or hours.”

⁸⁷ Anonymous museum worker, email to the author, February 11, 2020.

After the confrontation, part-time education staff were rarely scheduled together. Meetings with supervisors were changed or moved without notice. When Sanford returned to the National Liberty Museum after a two-month medical leave, she discovered that part-time staff she herself had hired and trained had been promoted above her. The chance for collective organizing was over.⁸⁸

While museum leadership is known to use their nonprofit status and personal employee investment to justify low wages and poor working conditions, past union drives also reveal an attempt by management to categorize the work as professional labor, creating a rhetorical distinction between frontline museum staff and the prototypical, “working-class” union member. Similar tactics are used to create interdepartmental divisions, wherein middle management are easily swallowed into the ‘leadership’ classification and thus less likely to feel solidarity with those on the frontlines, even though their salary may actually be closer to the lowest paid than highest. More than twenty years ago, Richard Handler and Eric Gable posed the question: “[i]n becoming managers, in learning to speak the language of management, have the new social historians lost their ability to hear the lessons their own historiography is intended to teach?”⁸⁹

Evidence of this phenomenon can be seen in the unionizing of Colonial Williamsburg’s hotel and restaurant staff, whose union was finally recognized in 1979 after a five-year struggle with administration. Union officials were appalled at the working conditions for a largely black workforce, evoking images of plantation labor and

⁸⁸Margaret Sanford, email to the author, February 8, 2020.

⁸⁹Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Duke University Press, 1997), 217, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822398523>.

re-appropriating corporate rhetoric of freedom and justice to highlight the hypocrisy present.⁹⁰

Yet when the union struck in 1991, administrative staff weren't the only ones who disapproved. So did the education staff. Attempts by labor organizers to encourage unionizing among the education department were unsuccessful, and though these interpreters were responsible for teaching Colonial Williamsburg's particular brand of 'bottom-up' social history, they had little sympathy for the union cause. "Despite similarities in pay scales and benefits," Handler and Gable note, "the costumed employees on the education side tended to see themselves as a group apart- as 'professionals', not low-level workers in a service industry."⁹¹

Attempts to evoke such language of class division has been used more recently to dissuade union drives, in particular at New York's Guggenheim Museum which unionized successfully last year. While the Guggenheim claimed to support the worker's right to unionize, an email from director Richard Handler the night before the union vote said that he didn't "want to work with a third party who has very limited experience in the museum field, and whose membership is largely in the heating and air-conditioning and construction industries."⁹² For many museum higher-ups, it seems, museum staff are too professional for unions but not quite professional enough for a living wage.

This type of division, a natural product of many museums' existing hierarchical structure, is not just used to prevent the type of broad coalition-building necessary for

⁹⁰Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*, 213-218.

⁹¹*Ibid*, 216.

⁹²Harris and Pogrebin, "Inside Hushed Museum Hallways, a Rumble Over Pay Grows Louder."

organizing efforts to take shape but has also been used to end union drives after they start. When the Tenement Museum first attempted unionization in 2008, more than a decade before it finally came to fruition, the administration pushed back; they said they did not oppose the union in theory, but obstructed the effort because they believed it should include all staff and not just part-time tour guides.⁹³ At the Plimoth Plantation, a living history site in Massachusetts, several staff reversed their 2018 union vote after the administration's use of intimidation and surveillance of union members, though Plimoth management denies this ever happened. Whatever the reason, several members pulled out, allowing the union to dissolve. When the union filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations board in response, Plimoth spokesperson Kate Sheehan balked. "It's interesting that when a majority of voting staff vote for a union, the union says 'the staff have spoken!' The union praises the democratic process," she said. "Yet, when a majority of staff petition not to be represented, the union loudly denounces that action, seeks to overturn the results, and disrespects the majority will. This double standard on the part of the union is repugnant."⁹⁴

In a 2016, an informal survey of more than 1,000 current and former museum staff members looked into why they had chosen to stay or leave the field. When asked what advice respondents would give to the museum field in order to retain workers, roughly half proffered answers related to the actions or decision-making of upper

⁹³Sewell Chan, "At Tenement Museum, a Fight Over Unionization," *City Room*, March 4, 2008, <https://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/03/04/at-tenement-museum-a-fight-over-unionization/>.

⁹⁴Emily Clark, "Plimoth Plantation No Longer Recognizes Union, Union Files Charges," *Wicked Local Plymouth*, accessed January 30, 2020, <https://plymouth.wickedlocal.com/news/20180403/plimoth-plantation-no-longer-recognizes-union-union-files-charges>.

management: 18% encouraged more support of workers through professional development opportunities, 16% said there needed to be more respect for employees, and 16% recommended changes in their museum's mission, board or leadership.⁹⁵

These changes have real stakes and tend to self-perpetuate: in order to stay in a field with low pay but that nonetheless requires advanced educational credentials, some have noted, one must have a certain level of class privilege. This has maintained a museum field made up of a largely white and upper-class population. Without a diverse pipeline to draw from, museum leadership remains especially homogenous, with people of color holding just 12% of leadership roles in 2018, an increase of just 1% from three years prior.⁹⁶ Yet it becomes difficult to incentivize diversification when those who make decisions about pay and respect are the ones most likely to be pushed out if real, structural change was to occur within the field.

This white, upper-class hegemony within museum management impacts not just our historic institutions but the kind of history we choose to tell within them. Across the country, museum workers are beginning to recognize that changing the way we interpret history will involve a historic movement, built from the ground up.

"I think the biggest challenge [to unionization] is management. It really is," wrote Margaret Sanford. "Front line are all educated, empowered, and diligent workers. Management simply does not understand what the roles actually entail, and thus are more inclined to refuse basic rights until it gets to a point of union threats...In a world where

⁹⁵"Why Are Great Museum Workers Leaving the Field 7-27."

⁹⁶Joan H. Baldwin, "Museums as a Pink Collar Profession," *American Alliance of Museums*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/03/25/museums-as-a-pink-collar-profession/>; Sara Aridi, "Museums Have Grown More Diverse, New Study Says," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2019, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/28/arts/design/mellon-museum-diversity-study.html>.

private museums have to rely on private donations, it is inherently political and management thinks of losing their jobs. The challenges to unionizing [at the National Liberty Museum] were management suppression, full stop.”

CHAPTER 4

LOVE'S LABOR'S LOST

In February of 2020, costumed tour guides with the Freedom Trail Foundation in Boston circulated a video online to encourage support in their fight for a fair contract after their successful union vote had been meant with stalled negotiations. A soundtrack of thunder and pouring rain plays over the video, as two guides in colonial dress pretend to cower at the thought of an impending storm. “Do you really have to work in this maelstrom?” one guide asks another. “Yes,” he responds, “the tour must go on.” The young bonnetted guide looks back at him, incredulous. “Safety be damned? Even in lightning?” she asks. “Who do they think you are, Benjamin Franklin?” As the video fades to black, text appears on-screen: *would you feel safe giving a tour in a lightning storm? Neither do we.*⁹⁷

When the Freedom Trail Foundation guides voted to unionize with Unite Here Local 26 last February, safety concerns related to inclement weather were just one inspiration for the union drive. Guides, many who have worked more than ten years with the foundation— even becoming local celebrities for their portrayal of famous Americans like abolitionist and early feminist Sojourner Truth— give tours to groups of up to fifty tourists while wearing 18th century dress: and that means no modern microphones. When guides lose their voice or fall ill, a frequent occurrence when giving tours to large groups in the midst of thunderstorms and shouting over the sound of rain and Boston traffic, they

⁹⁷Unite Here Local 26, Twitter Post, February 19, 2020, 11:02am.
<https://twitter.com/UNITEHERE26/status/1230160781737631744>

are expected to find their own replacement. If they can't, they are expected to come to work regardless of their health.⁹⁸

It has now been more than a year since the vote that established the Bellringer's Guild, the name guides chose for their union after an 18th-century labor organization founded by Paul Revere, yet contract negotiations continue. After using the ongoing negotiations as an excuse to withhold scheduled pay raises, the union filed complaints with the National Labor Relations Board, suggesting that the Freedom Trail Foundation administration was not bargaining in good faith.⁹⁹

For these revolutionaries, the ongoing fight for a contract has been long and taxing, but throughout the process guides have remained insistent on one central point: none of this would be worth it if they didn't love their jobs. It's a refrain that carries throughout the recent movement, suggesting that the union fight is one borne of passion for one's work and a desire to improve an organization they love. It is a fight, furthermore, that has come to reveal a considerable disparity between how managers and workers perceive of frontline labor. Because, despite the Freedom Trail Foundation's website proclaiming that their tours generate more than \$1 billion every year in local spending, when long-time guide Tim Hoover came to work dressed in a suit and tie (after attending a wake) his manager asked if it meant he was interviewing for a "real job."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸Joe Ramsey, "In Fear of Losing Their Voices, Boston Freedom Trail Guides Speak Up (While They Still Can)," *DigBoston*, December 19, 2019, <https://digboston.com/in-fear-of-losing-their-voices-boston-freedom-trail-guides-unite-and-speak-up-while-they-still-can/>.

⁹⁹Katie Johnston, "Case of Freedom Trail Guides Headed to the NLRB," *BostonGlobe.com*, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2020/02/05/case-freedom-trail-guides-headed-nlrb/vzbw89H9psc9VtrrpW6kfp/story.html>.

¹⁰⁰Ramsey, "In Fear of Losing Their Voices, Boston Freedom Trail Guides Speak Up (While They Still Can)."

For Hoover and many others, interpretation and history work *is* their real job; or, at least, they'd like it to be given adequate pay and workplace protection. The fight waged by the Bellringer's Guild and a growing number of cultural workers throughout the country, who put their health, bodies and voices on the line for their jobs, is simply to have their labor seen as actual work: even if it is a labor of love.

As the PASTA unionization of 1971 demonstrates, the relationship of unions to cultural labor is a relatively recent phenomenon with a short but nonetheless convoluted past. For public historical institutions particularly, discussions of the function of labor within the field are even more muddled. Indeed, as the first-ever professional union was forming at MoMA and the world was watching them take to the streets, the nascent field of public history was just beginning to take shape.

The well-trod story of public history's late-20th century origins always begins the same way: with desperation. Job scarcity within the academy by the 1970s had driven professional historians out into the field, taking jobs as curators, archivists and historic interpreters. Eventually, some universities began to respond in kind, addressing these changes by offering courses that could train historians how to apply their expertise beyond the ivory tower.¹⁰¹ By 1978, the release of the first edition of *The Public Historian* would codify the terminology for this new way of performing history work. "[Public] historians generally have become viewed as the working class in the larger community of historians, a factor that perhaps contributes to the tendency among those

¹⁰¹Rebecca Conard, *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, c2002.), 164.

who have graduated from public history programs to assume job classification titles as their primary identity: curator, education director, interpretive specialist, collections manager and so forth."¹⁰² With the adoption of such identities, however, these professional historians began unintentionally to distance themselves from their professionalism; especially as they often took on work performing history on behalf of “clients” who seemed to threaten the pure, objective history of the academy, a whispered question began to form that still haunts the field today: when the public gets involved, are you even a historian anymore?

The genealogy of heritage tourism laid out in Chapter 1 helps expound the complex and constantly shifting role of public historical interpreters, inhabiting the liminal role between educator and performer, academia and mass culture. While many, like Cathy Stanton, label public historical interpreters as “cultural intermediaries”, the exact definition of this term remains in flux, just as the exact terms of public historical labor resist definition.¹⁰³

The divergence in understanding about the role of a cultural intermediary largely questions exactly what these figures mediate between: are they, as Pierre Bourdieu would suggest, brokers between culture and society, both midwife and mother in the act of social reproduction? Or is their role as economic actors, framing culture to qualify the value of goods in a market economy?¹⁰⁴ For many public historians, it isn’t either or.

¹⁰²Conard, *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History*, 174.

¹⁰³Cathy Stanton, “Displaying the Industrial: Toward a Genealogy of Heritage Labor,” *Labor* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 151–70, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15476715-7269374>.; Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews, “Are We All Cultural Intermediaries Now? An Introduction to Cultural Intermediaries in Context,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (October 1, 2012): 551–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549412445762>.

¹⁰⁴Maguire and Matthews, “Are We All Cultural Intermediaries Now?”, 551.

Interpreters and content creators at historic sites must frame historical narratives for cultural reproduction within mass audiences, while remaining cognizant of how to shape these stories in a way that is economically salient for an institution to remain viable as a tourist attraction. Navigating this murky role has become a fundamental part of public historical labor and, as evidenced from the development of heritage interpretation and cultural display, allows the work to be carried out by practitioners with a variety of backgrounds, from professional historians to those with first-person experiences of the history at hand.

Most recently, history work has been overrun with members of the so called ‘creative class’, a term first coined by Richard Florida in his landmark book, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. Though his thesis has been frequently discussed and criticized since the book was first published in 2002, Florida’s popular proposal suggests that workers within a “creative economy,” those that produce commoditized ideas and innovation, would become the primary producers of knowledge within the postindustrial workplace, necessitating a complete overhaul of traditional economic structures and workplace relationships.¹⁰⁵ Included in this shift would be an increasingly autonomous worker, seeking to sell their ideas rather than perform productive labor on someone else’s behalf. In Florida’s formulation, this new intangible market of ideas had the potential to revitalize cities through this influx of creative human capital.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵Amanda Coles, “Creative Class Politics: Unions and the Creative Economy,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 22, no. 3 (May 26, 2016): 457, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2014.994612>.

¹⁰⁶Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002).

Considerations of the creative class as market actors and generators of symbolic value sound remarkably similar to the dual roles of cultural intermediaries and thus the work of public historians, from the transvaluation of culture into heritage and back for neo-bohemian appropriation of spaces devastated by the postindustrial shift. Yet, although some ethnographers suggest the rise of the creative class was the result of an increasing desire for autonomy and flexibility within the workforce, driven by the creatives themselves, this shift towards precarious labor (both within public history and the creative economy writ large) can also be interpreted in line with an increasingly neoliberal economy. While worker demands for increased autonomy could have been an expected development following the 1960's demise of Fordism, the resulting "flexibilization" of labor was indeed orchestrated from above, in "ways that coincided with a corporate drive for outsourcing risks onto individuals and reducing corporate responsibility for their workforce."¹⁰⁷

Thus, the trend toward precarity, excused as a natural outgrowth of autonomy, becomes a perfect fit within the labor of display— fitting in neatly with tourism as a seasonal industry— as both state and privately-funded organizations could outsource the work onto cultural contractors, who could represent a particular history with their voices and bodies while still providing a certain amount of institutional plausible deniability. At the Freedom Trail Foundation (and likely many other organizations), this problem manifests within a racialized framework: black guides, attempting to play historically accurate representations of 18th-century black Bostonians, have been criticized by

¹⁰⁷Marisol Sandoval, "Fighting Precarity with Co-Operation? Worker Co-Operatives in the Cultural Sector," *New Formations*, no. 88 (2016): 53.

management after complaints from visitors that race or slavery was brought up on the tour. “They seem to want black faces, but not black voices,” says Kelli Strong, who portrays enslaved poet Phyllis Wheatley.¹⁰⁸

Yet, though the shift towards a creative class of cultural workers carried a multitude of benefits for administrators—shifting the responsibility for fraught history onto interpreters themselves while now able to offer pay in-line with seasonal work—this development came into sharp contrast with the industry’s professional origins, and the professional degree requirement that typically still came along with it. But little protection was available for this new class of highly qualified yet precarious workers, as fluctuating models of employment was also muddling the traditional role of unions as defenders of the working class. As Greg de Pueter notes, “trade unions confront in creative industries the convergence of two trends they have had difficulty adapting to: the growth of knowledge intensive, communicative, and cultural work and the growth of flexible employment arrangements in which workers lack a single employer or a shared worksite.”¹⁰⁹

While this largely references freelance and contract work, evidence of this difficulty can also be interpreted within the dispersal of employment type and location within singular historical institutions. When a union drive was initiated in the late 1980s by historic guides at the Minnesota Historical Society, which includes several historic sites throughout the state, they launched an ultimately doomed attempt to bring all

¹⁰⁸Ramsey, “In Fear of Losing Their Voices, Boston Freedom Trail Guides Speak Up (While They Still Can).”

¹⁰⁹Greig de Pueter, “Creative Economy and Labor Precarity: A Contested Convergence,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (October 1, 2011): 417–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859911416362>.

workers holding a nonsupervisory position at MHS into the effort. By 1992, Amy Tyson notes in her study of the MHS, the union had completely fallen apart: “it would seem that job descriptions and job titles were too varied for these MHS workers to feel solidarity with each other,” she notes, “notwithstanding that the bargaining unit was spread throughout the entire state.”¹¹⁰

Could a scattered, autonomous workforce build enough solidarity to engage in unified, collective bargaining? Or had the shift towards creative labor relegated unions into mere relics of the past? The rise of the creative economy combined with neoliberal logic seemed to suggest this was the case: if you don’t like the conditions of your workplace, find a new one.¹¹¹

Of course, this model doesn’t account for the role that expertise plays in cultural employment as a defining feature of cultural intermediaries, which often requires frontline staff to have multilayered competencies in historic research, subject-specific knowledge, and customer service.¹¹² All this, including the advanced degree often required as evidence of such proficiency, results in an above-average investment— fiscal, intellectual and emotional— from most frontline workers. Moreover, as members of a creative class who use their autonomy to pursue work they are passionate about, cultural laborers tend to have a genuine passion for the work and the institutions they work for; unfortunately, a neoliberal economy has little room for love.

¹¹⁰ Amy M. Tyson, *The Wages of History: Emotional Labor on Public History’s Front Lines* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 57, <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/22924>.

¹¹¹ Coles, “Creative Class Politics”, 461.

¹¹² Maguire and Matthews, “Are We All Cultural Intermediaries Now?”, 556.

Like the guides of the Bellringer's Guild, the "labor of love" narrative is a common thread connecting stories of both successful and failed cultural union drives.¹¹³ In a 2017 study of why museum workers were leaving the field, "the work" itself was by far the number one reason that compelled individuals to stay (while it was the low pay that encouraged them to leave).¹¹⁴

In November of 2017, more than a year after a successful vote to unionize among frontline living history interpreters at Plimoth Plantation, organizing committee member Kimberley Crowley posted an open letter online for the organization's Board of Trustees. The post came months after the letter had been originally sent, on the occasion of Crowley's departure from the job, and in the midst of a ruthless anti-union campaign waged by Plimoth management. Crowley never received a response.

"I am writing to you as one of the first people to go public as a leader in the Plimoth Plantation Union Organizing Committee, and I want you to know *I did it because I love this museum*," the letter states. "Contrary to how it has been portrayed recently, love of this museum and involvement in the unionization drive are inseparable, and that fact deserves to be understood."¹¹⁵ Crowley details the various reasons for the union vote, which were largely related to unsafe understaffing in the museum's restored 17th-century English village. She notes how she feared missing a shift and leaving only

¹¹³Emma Boast, "Labor of Love: Revaluing Museum Work," *Medium*, December 21, 2017, <https://medium.com/@eboast/labor-of-love-revaluing-museum-work-d83a1677e822>.

¹¹⁴Claudia Ocello et al., "Why Are Great Museum Workers Leaving the Field," https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1_aHdxmG0Jdb4deqsjyhH9eoDUIPXz_EdkU-7gWuXDwE/edit?urp=gmail_link&usp=embed_facebook.

¹¹⁵Kimberly Crowley, "Dear Plimoth Plantation Board of Trustees — One Year After the Unionization Vote, I Stand By This..." *Medium*, November 18, 2017, <https://medium.com/@kimberlycrowley/dear-plimoth-plantation-board-of-trustees-one-year-after-the-unionization-vote-i-stand-by-this-67a991e23498>.

seven guides to manage a sprawling village hosting school groups of more than 1,000 children, a fact that was used against her by the organization's hired anti-union consultant when Crowley refused to leave work after receiving news of her grandfather's death. According to Crowley, she chose to stay despite the news because of an impending union-related meeting with the CEO that couldn't be rescheduled, and the fear of leaving the site understaffed. "You would put your coworkers above your family?" the consultant asked her. Throughout the letter, Crowley maintains that the union effort was one borne from a genuine devotion to the institution. "Yet, while management continues to fight," she writes, "we seem, as a museum, to have lost sight of a crucial fact: everyone was and still is fighting for the success of the place we all love."

Six months after publicly posting the letter, and after more than a year of union busting from the administration, several Plimoth Plantation employees reversed their vote, and the union dissolved.

Though work on public historical labor remains in its infancy, scholars like Amy Tyson have tried to highlight the role much of this work occupies as "emotional" or affective labor, work related to the regulation of emotion in others. For many interpreters, particularly those responsible for relaying painful or dark history, emotional labor becomes both a means of encouraging empathy for historical actors as well as managing visitor comfort within the service-oriented environment most museums have become.¹¹⁶ This often creates a strange dissonance, as frontline workers must navigate the relaying of

¹¹⁶Amy M. Tyson, "Crafting Emotional Comfort: Interpreting the Painful Past at Living History Museums in the New Economy," *Museum and Society* 6, no. 3 (2008): 246–62.

troubling (even identity-shattering) information while still creating a pleasant, service-focused encounter for guests.¹¹⁷ Maneuvering these conflicting objectives can be emotionally taxing, exacerbating feelings of failure, stress and exhaustion associated with job burnout.¹¹⁸

Overwork and burnout, consequently, understandably limit one's ability to take on additional and unpaid labor outside of the workplace, such as collective organizing. And this work tends to be both intellectual and affective: significant time and energy needs to be devoted to organizing and negotiating, while simultaneously considerable emotion is spent encouraging and managing the expectations of coworkers whose jobs may hang in the balance. As R.E. Fulton, a member of the organizing committee at the recently unionized Tenement Museum, wrote: "The biggest challenge is probably that people need their jobs and there are very few of them in the small field of museums-- anything that seems to potentially endanger a job, let alone a career, in museums makes a lot of people nervous. Our effort succeeded, I think, because we are a very close-knit workplace of people who already habitually talk to each other and support each other--far more so than in any other workplace I've known, even workplaces where people did talk and support each other."¹¹⁹

While staff support was a key factor in the success of the Tenement Museum's union drive, the labor necessary to sustain this kind of loyalty spelled the end for many

¹¹⁷Tyson, "Crafting Emotional Comfort"; Joy Sather-Wagstaff, "Memory, Space/Place, Tourism: Paradigms and Problems," in *Heritage That Hurts: Tourists in the Memoryscapes of September 11* (Walnut Creek, UNITED STATES: Routledge, 2011), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/templeuniv-ebooks/detail.action?docID=684529>.

¹¹⁸Ealasaid Munro, "Doing Emotion Work in Museums: Reconceptualising the Role of Community Engagement Practitioners," *Museum and Society* 12, no. 1 (March 2014): 44–60.

¹¹⁹R.E. Fulton, Email to the Author, February 11, 2020.

other movements. At the National Liberty Museum, Margaret Sanford helped catalyze a movement that ended before it could truly begin. After confronting management to raise wages, Sanford says, “we had to become our own advocates daily, keeping tally of issues in a group message...[as] I trained new employees, not paid, I was upfront about what they should watch out for. It became difficult to see people excited get burnt out or hurt.”¹²⁰

Burnout doesn’t just impact individual union drives within organizations, but also holds back any possibility of broad reform within the field. In 2015, the conversation about museum labor seemed to be at the forefront of people’s minds after a “rogue session” at that year’s American Alliance of Museums conference resulted in the creation of #MuseumWorkersSpeak, a “collective of activist museum workers interrogating the relationship between museums’ stated commitments to social value and their internal labor practices.”¹²¹ Over the next few months, the organization sponsored a flurry of talks and regional meet-ups. Within three years, however, momentum fizzled. Alli Hartley, an organizer of the D.C. chapter of Museum Workers Speak, wrote about the organization’s demise: “we were all in difficult job situations.” “We were tired,” Hartley wrote, “this project ... which was supposed to be our way of giving back to the field and lifting others up was sapping way more out of us than any of us could afford to give at that particular time in our lives.”¹²²

¹²⁰Margaret Sanford, Email to the Author, February 8, 2020.

¹²¹“Museum Workers Speak - Home,” Museum workers speak, accessed February 25, 2020, <http://museumworkersspeak.weebly.com/>.

¹²²Alli Hartley, “The Care and Keeping of Museum Workers — A Two Years Later Reflection,” *Medium*, March 17, 2018, <https://medium.com/@allihartley/the-care-and-keeping-of-museum-workers-a-two-years-later-reflection-f7cc334c45db>.

The inability (not just within museums, but the workforce at large) to properly recognize and value affective labor has had a major impact on its technical composition within the “new” economy. In 2009’s *Commonwealth*, Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri argue that understanding this shifting nature of labor can help reveal where and how it is being exploited.¹²³ They highlight several trends that, though theoretical, can be seen in practice through the union conflicts discussed in this chapter. This includes an expansion in immaterial labor, which has framed human beings as the very capital one must regulate in order to increase symbolic value. This is exactly the trend evidenced through the control of Freedom Trail Foundation guides’ bodies and voices in order to commodify their immaterial labor (the sharing of knowledge and entertainment of guests) to the tune of more than \$1 billion of local spending. Hardt and Negri also note an increasing feminization of the labor market over the past three decades, with an increase in the emotional and affective relationship tasks traditionally associated with ‘women’s work’.¹²⁴ This kind of work can be seen most obviously at Plimoth Plantation, where guides must simultaneously craft emotional comfort for visitors while literally tending home: cooking and cleaning in the 17th-century village while watching over throngs of school children.

Negative associations of immaterial and feminized labor, which have the tendency to devalue and exploit this kind of work, impact not just how employers see their staff but also how workers perceive their own labor. In *Wages of History*, Amy Tyson’s interviews with frontline staff at Historic Fort Snelling reveal the impact of

¹²³Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Mass. : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 133.

¹²⁴Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 133.

neoliberal logic on the fort's historic guides, from whom was evident "an undercurrent of derision for those employees who considered this second-income job as worthy of engaging in collective resistance so as to improve conditions." From this perspective, she observes, "if the interpreters were not happy with conditions at this seasonal job, it was their own fault for choosing to work there."¹²⁵ These interpreters, Tyson notes, had a tendency to distance themselves from the identity of "seasonal interpreter" or the conception that this was a permanent gig, since adopting such an identity "would signal a mismanagement of their lives."¹²⁶ Certainly, any movement to unionize would require admittance of the value of such labor and the worthiness of fighting to protect it, a complicated mission among staff members holding such diverse levels of investment and even disdain for the idea.

Part of this disagreement over labor within public history can be traced back to the origin of the field and its reliance on the principle of "shared authority," which asserts that lived or personal experience of history is just as valuable as an academic analysis of the past.¹²⁷ Public historians are encouraged to collaborate with non-historian communities to produce work that will somehow serve the populations implicated in the history they study: what Laura Peers and Allison K. Brown call "source communities."¹²⁸ Yet the involvement of source communities in the work of public history, while crucial to

¹²⁵ Tyson, *The Wages of History*, 66.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 68.

¹²⁷ Michael H. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (State University of New York Press, 1990).

¹²⁸ Alison K. Brown and Laura Peers, *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2003), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/templeuniv-ebooks/detail.action?docID=237356>.

the work, has made the exact definition of a “public historian” difficult to nail down. Are community members that help with projects that commemorate local history public historians? What about subjects of oral history interviews? When authority is shared, public historical labor is performed by all kinds of stakeholders, many without degrees or formal historical training: do they have a role to play in the public historical revolution?

In recent years, a select few museums and historic sites have begun to incorporate shared authority into their interpretive programming, and have been rewarded in turn with acclaim, awards, and thousands in grant funding. Such programs— like the Returning Citizens Tour Guide Program at Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, which hires formerly incarcerated guides to share lived experience of prison, and the Global Guides initiative at the Penn Museum, which staffs the galleries with refugee docents from the same part of the world as the ancient artifacts— are indeed impressive, bringing much needed diversity and insight to a largely homogeneous field.¹²⁹ A perhaps unintended effect, however, of bringing source communities onto a museum’s payroll, is an influx of staff that has a very particular reason for their work, and that reason (the administration assumes, at least) is not to fight for increased professionalization within the field. Leadership behind such programs often promote the work as a way to provide jobs and employment resources for marginalized populations, which seems to suggest that this docent work is not seen as a final destination. These programs, then, are not about bringing diverse populations into museum work on a permanent basis.

Instead, administrations are able to benefit from the immaterial labor of a purposefully

¹²⁹Neda Ulaby, “Refugee Docents Help Bring A Museum’s Global Collection To Life,” *NPR.org*, accessed February 25, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/17/795920834/refugee-docents-help-bring-a-museums-global-collection-to-life>. ; Jessica Lussenhop, “Inmate Guides at 19th Century US Prison,” *BBC News*, May 11, 2016, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36163247>.

precarious workforce without needing to worry about long-term investment. Further, these programs tend to be grant funded, allowing for unusually high wages: \$20 per hour for the Penn Museum global guides. With a living wage that is already, for some of the guides, a second income, what reason is there to start a fight?

The evolution of the field of public history— and the work of those laboring within it— has long resisted typology in a way unique to a field that privileges the practice of sharing authority with non-professionals. To be successful in the union effort, cultural organizers have shown, public historical laborers must recognize their work as such, have the investment necessary to fight for it, as well as the time, project management skill and emotional support to finish the battle once it's begun. They must also have the willingness to risk everything in the process. For most public historical workers, there are obstacles to be found at almost every step along the way, muddling the movement and restricting the possibility to build solidarity among staff members. For any progress to be made within public historical organizing, coalition-building will be crucial. A worker at a museum in Philadelphia, where nascent union discussions ultimately led to the core group of frontline employees being laid off and the entire department being restructured, reflected on the eventual waning of union discussion as staff left or were let go: “separated, there’s not a lot any of us can do.”¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Anonymous, email to author, February 13, 2020.

CHAPTER 5

“GET A REAL CAREER, LOSERS”

In 2020, the Milwaukee Public Museum would be thrust into local news during negotiations for a new union contract with AFSCME Local 526, the union that has long represented their employees. When union officials saw the initial contract proposal, which offered no raises, no cost of living adjustments, and a 1.5% reduction in 401k benefits (not to mention a provision which would track an employee’s private medical information through an app to determine their healthcare premium) they balked. Union president Jaclyn Kelly said she had never seen anything like it before.¹³¹ On January 18th, in the midst of a frigid Wisconsin winter, the union took to the street with picket signs.

The recent trouble comes just three years after another picket of the MPM, the result of stunned employees opening their newspapers to the news of mass layoffs at their workplace. The layoffs, along with severely reduced hours, were part of a \$1 million cut to employee wages which the museum claimed was just one facet of a broad restructuring that would allow them to invest in better collections care. Yet union officials remained suspicious: this was not the first time the MPM had ‘restructured’. The museum indeed had a long legacy of anti-union activity, including retaliating against union leaders and

¹³¹Graham Kilmer, “Museum Would Monitor Workers’ Health Choices,” *Urban Milwaukee*, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2020/02/03/museum-would-monitor-workers-health-choices/>.

outsourcing labor to nonunion employees. Was this restructuring just another move to undermine the union's presence at MPM?¹³²

Evidence of union busting and anti-union rhetoric can be found throughout nearly all the stories of cultural labor activism, from the January 2020 picket of the MPM to nearly forty years prior, when unionized staff at the Vancouver Museum (now the Museum of Vancouver) went on strike in 1984, resulting in the museum's temporary closure. Ten years later, leadership would attempt a 'restructuring' similar to the one at MPM that they hoped could help revive the then flailing institution. Proposals included renting out artifacts, increasing admissions fees, and laying off more than half of unionized employees. This also included dismantling the museum's First Nations educational programs, though museum treasurer Ken Maddison suggested it would soon return under the new advisory of local tribal leaders: "we want them to be the people who talk about first nation's programs," Maddison said in 1994.¹³³ Who could argue with that?

Anti-union tactics have taken a number of different forms in the more recent drives, ranging from the hiring of third-party union busting contractors to mass layoffs, under the common guise of restructuring. "In our case, they certainly found out before we announced, but they really only tried a couple things in attempts to block the vote (narrow the bargaining unit, spread some scary union misinformation, sow distrust) and we won by a wide margin," said Emma, a Costumed Historical Tour Guide who recently

¹³²AFSCME Local 526, "Stop Layoffs and Union Busting at MPM," *Urban Milwaukee*, March 8, 2017, <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/pressrelease/stop-layoffs-and-union-busting-at-mpm/>.

¹³³ "History on Hiatus; How Will the Vancouver Museum 'de-Access' its Collection of Labor, Money and Morale Woes?," *The Vancouver Sun*, July 16, 1994, sec. Entertainment.

helped with a successful union drive at her organization.¹³⁴ Similar methods were employed at the Tenement Museum, which finally unionized last April after multiple failed attempts in previous decades. “Their response was chilly and lightly manipulative: they held four captive audience meetings gently suggesting, though not saying outright, that the union would be a rigid, unfeeling outside force that would take away benefits and freedoms from our workplace,” said organizing committee member R.E. Fulton.¹³⁵

Of course, union busting is not unique to the cultural sector. Today, anti-union practices by employers are not only commonplace but, to some degree, an expected part of any organized movement; one that has relegated the ‘u’ word to hushed tones whispered behind closed doors. Within the cultural and nonprofit field, however, there is an added challenge in building a movement against such nefarious activity when the story’s antagonists hardly seem antagonistic at all. Further, legislation of the last seventy-or-so years has been largely in support of employers, offering the legal backing for leadership to suppress labor activism and de-incentivize the union cause.¹³⁶ How do you convince the world that the villain of this story is a band of (who at least many perceive to be) activists, community leaders and patrons of the arts, engaging in mostly legal activities to save their cash-strapped cultural institution from destruction? Who simply seek to save money for collections care and provide opportunities for First Nations representatives to tell their own stories? Who sounds like the villain now?

¹³⁴Emma, email to the author, February 10, 2020.

¹³⁵R. E. Fulton, email to the author, February 11, 2020.

¹³⁶Rosemary Feurer and Chad Pearson, “Introduction: Against Labor,” in *Against Labor, How U.S. Employers Organized to Defeat Union Activism* (University of Illinois Press, 2017), 7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1p6qq3f.4>.

Thus far, there has been little investigation of the recent response to museum unionization drives. This is largely the result of a movement that, even as news of cultural union success or scandals in museum management seem to shake the art world or history or ‘museum twitter’, has mostly remained an inter-field discussion. However, an understanding of how the mass public views unions, museums, and the intersection of these two, can help us predict the overall trajectory of this movement, as well as offer perspective on how both museum leaders and frontline workers are internalizing their own role as public-facing figures and potential villains in their fight for a fair wage.

“[The] idea of unionizing seemed like an escalation, one concrete reason to be like ‘Oh that person SHOULD be fired’,” wrote a museum worker on hearing the initial union buzz at one of the three museums she was simultaneously working at last year. “All I wanted was job security or to be out of the situation I was stuck in so I tried to avoid conversations of unionizing or I would write them off pretending to be nonchalant. Like unions? What's that? Those aren't important.”¹³⁷

How have unions, which were once associated with mass and often-violent protests as workers laid down their life for the right to organize, become something so feared by workers, associated with an implied assumption of employer retaliation?

Nearly a century ago, unions were on the rise. The passage in 1935 of the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act had extended workplace protections, reaffirmed the right to organize and bargain collectively, outlawed unfair labor practices aimed at preventing unionization, and established the National Labor Relations Board to ensure

¹³⁷ Anonymous museum worker, email to the author, February 11, 2020.

such protections were maintained. Throughout the following decade, union density would leap from 9 to 35% within the manufacturing sector.¹³⁸ That's not to say that all were immediately on board: employers, especially in the conservative anti-union south, swiftly turned to state power to try and limit the influence of union labor, even as federal law sought to protect it. An even sharper turn came in 1947, after a Republican takeover of Congress allowed for the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act, essentially undoing unions' New Deal-era gains. The new law limited strikes and other forms of mass collective action, and protected "employer free speech" during union drives.¹³⁹

Further, the Taft-Hartley Act outlawed the 'closed shop'— a workplace in which employers pledge only to hire union members, and therefore employment is conditional on workers joining the union— and introduced 'right to work' laws, which extends union benefits to all employees within a workplace (without needing to pay membership dues), whether they are a member of the union or not.¹⁴⁰ Today, twenty-eight states have right-to-work laws in place, which has proved devastating to union membership: according to Jamie Peck, "union density rates are markedly lower in RTW states, though there is a continuing debate over whether this is an outcome of the law itself or a manifestation of an underlying political culture hostile to unions".¹⁴¹

The passage of the Taft-Hartley Act, which legitimized union opposition through state allyship with employers, had been a poison dart in the side of organized labor; it

¹³⁸Jamie Peck, "The Right to Work, and the Right at Work," *Economic Geography* 92, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 4–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00130095.2015.1112233>.

¹³⁹ Feurer and Pearson, "Introduction.", 14.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Peck, "The Right to Work, and the Right at Work.", 11.

wouldn't be until 1981, however, that Ronald Reagan struck the fatal blow. Presenting himself as pro-union during his election campaign, Regan would find the first year of his presidency plagued by complicated union negotiations with the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). PATCO negotiators believed they had the ultimate leverage: their highly skilled work would make them irreplaceable. But on August 3, 1981, as Reagan stood behind a podium in the rose garden and stared down a throng of reporters, his message was clear: no one is irreplaceable.¹⁴²

In his statement, Reagan painted striking PATCO members as unreasonable law-breakers that, with their greed-driven demands for more money, would “impose a tax burden on their fellow citizens which is unacceptable”.¹⁴³ As public employees had taken an oath upon employment that they would not strike for the preservation of public safety, Reagan announced, any PATCO members not immediately reporting for duty would be terminated. With one move, Reagan fired nearly 12,000 skilled union members, swiftly and suddenly ending the strike.¹⁴⁴

Several economists and labor historians have noted the crucial role of the PATCO firings in turning the tide on public perception of unions. From past conceptions of working-class heroes, the strikers had easily become the antagonists in Reagan's formulation, greedy succubi depleting the values of a law-abiding society. As career organizer Steve Early notes, “PATCO's destruction ushered in a decade of lost strikes and lockouts, triggered by management demands for pay and benefit givebacks. Given

¹⁴²Steve Early, *Save Our Unions : Dispatches from a Movement in Distress* (New York: MR Monthly Review Press, 2013), 74.

¹⁴³Ronald Reagan, “President Reagan's Remarks on the Air Traffic Controllers Strike in Rose Garden” (Washington D.C., August 3, 1981), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEqOSzgQNhI>.

¹⁴⁴ Early, *Save Our Unions*, 74.

renewed momentum by our latest recession, this concession bargaining trend continues unabated today, in both the private and public sector.”¹⁴⁵

Perhaps things are beginning to change: in 2019, public approval of unions hit a near fifty-year high with 64% of Americans showing their support, and perhaps this upturn is reflected in union infiltration within the cultural sector.¹⁴⁶ Yet, even if they approve, trends continue to reveal that a diminishing role for organized labor within society: union density has been steadily declining since the 1950s, as has collective action. From 1947 to 2019, the number of work stoppages has plummeted from 470 in 1952, at highest, to just 25 last year.¹⁴⁷

This general lack of awareness about what unions do and who their members are is undoubtedly impacting cultural workers’ ability to generate support among a staff that may simply be unable to see themselves as union members. In 2018, a study from Gibney et al. asked how respondents imagined a ‘typical’ union member. By and large, the image that came to mind was of a white, male blue-collar worker with a high school degree or less.¹⁴⁸ When it came to the industry, 44.8% of surveyed individuals imagined union members as being in construction and maintenance and 35% guessed production, transportation and material moving. Yet this stands in significant contrast with the reality: a sample of union members showed 42% in management and professional related

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Gallup Inc, “As Labor Day Turns 125, Union Approval Near 50-Year High,” Gallup.com, August 28, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/265916/labor-day-turns-125-union-approval-near-year-high.aspx>.

¹⁴⁷ “Major Work Stoppages: Annual Summary Data” (Bureau of Labor Statistics), accessed February 27, 2020, https://www.bls.gov/web/wkstp/annual-listing.htm#annual_listing.xlsx.f.3.

¹⁴⁸ Ray Gibney et al., “‘I Know I Am, But What Are You?’: Public Perceptions of Unions, Members and Joining Intentions,” *Social Sciences* 7, no. 9 (September 2018): 6-8, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7090146>.

occupations, 59.3% of whom had an associate degree or higher. Indeed, union members were 1.5 times more likely than nonmembers to have a graduate degree.¹⁴⁹

The image of the non-college educated, white blue-collar union member squares nicely with the New Deal era, golden age of organized labor. And indeed, 47% of respondents in Gibney et al.'s survey believe that "there was a time when unions were needed, but the need has now passed."¹⁵⁰ With this statistic in mind, the comments of one museum worker are not at all out of place: "To be honest," she wrote, "my friends started the conversation and I felt confused because to me unions were a thing of the past. Yeah, I knew people in unions, but I felt like it was more of a formality. This is honestly surprisingly naive on my part because I know people who benefited from being protected by their unions. Yet at the same time, school made it seem like unions were archaic and something trendy of the past like flappers."¹⁵¹

If unions belong in the past, one might imagine that purveyors of such a past would be at the forefront of this movement. Yet public historical institutions remain woefully behind the union curve, while art workers of the world surge ahead. How has public perception of not just unions but history museums themselves perhaps halted history's progress?

Answering this question requires an understanding of how the public sees the relationship between union members and their workplaces, and data from Gibney et al.'s study seems to suggest that public sentiment is not on labor's side, with a majority of

¹⁴⁹ Gibney et al., "I Know I Am, But What Are You?", 6-8.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵¹ Anonymous museum worker, email to the author, February 11, 2020.

respondents believing that unions prevent productivity within a workplace and negatively impact worker performance.

In a capitalist society, it's unlikely that any force believed to be working against productivity will be perceived favorably, especially when the object of that production is a sense of heritage claimed by a variety of stakeholders. And when it comes to the museums doing this generative work, the public continues to invest a significant amount of trust in the product they ultimately consume. If staff at these institutions unionize, which many think would be to the detriment to the work performed in such spaces, what would happen to such trust?

The question of trust in museums has been popular since the 1998 publication of Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen's landmark *The Presence of the Past*, which surveyed 1,500 Americans about the role history played in their daily lives, finding that museums were highly trusted as a means of learning about the past, far more than other sources like history books, eyewitnesses and movies.¹⁵² When the trustworthiness portion of the study was replicated twenty years later, with the addition of the internet as a potential source of historic study, results were largely the same: 81% of respondents said history museums were "absolutely" or "somewhat" trustworthy.¹⁵³

It was a number many were justifiably proud of, though others suggested that, perhaps, the wrong question was being asked. A majority of people believed museums were trustworthy: but what did they trust them to do? "That trust is apparently based on a

¹⁵² Roy Rosenzweig and David P. Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=68575>.

¹⁵³ John Dichtl, "Most Trust Museums as Sources of Historical Information," *AASLH*, February 20, 2018, <https://aaslh.org/most-trust-museums/>.

perception that museums stand for authenticity and accuracy in a way that professors, teachers, and books do not,” suggested James Gardner. “Rosenzweig and Thelen explain that the public feel they can go to museums and interpret artifacts the way they want, unmediated, without concern that ideas are being interposed between them and the objects. And that means the public really don't get what museums do, that we too have perspectives, make choices, present arguments, just like our colleagues elsewhere in the profession.”¹⁵⁴

Indeed, recent studies have shown that the public demonstrably does not want museums to have perspectives or present arguments. In 2017, a study from MuseumNext found that only 27.5% of those surveyed believed museums should have something to say about social issues (compared with 31% no and 40.5% maybe).¹⁵⁵ A 2013 study from the United Kingdom concluded that, while the public would tolerate a museum addressing controversial subjects, they believed the museum itself must remain neutral, including both sides of any argument in their exhibitions.¹⁵⁶ Thus, the public doesn't necessarily trust museums as spaces that can help connect the past to social issues relevant in the present day. As discussed as Chapter One with the rise of the neoliberal museum, visitors trust museums *because* they are unmediated; they believe the site or objects should and can speak for themselves.

¹⁵⁴James B. Gardner, “Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public,” *The Public Historian* 26, no. 4 (2004): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tpb.2004.26.4.11>.

¹⁵⁵“Should Museums Be Activists?,” MuseumNext, April 24, 2017, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/should-museums-be-activists/>.

¹⁵⁶BritainThinks, “Public Perceptions Of- and Attitudes to- the Purposes of Museums in Society,” March 2013.; “Trust Me, I'm a Museum,” *American Alliance of Museums*, February 3, 2015, <https://www.aamus.org/2015/02/03/trust-me-im-a-museum/>.

How might this perception be ultimately undermining support for the cultural union effort, and how might it be internalized by the museum worker in conceptions of their own labor? After all, if objects speak for themselves, why should we pay someone to speak for them?

Gardner's critique of such "trustworthiness" studies invokes another important question: if the public, as he suggests, "[do] not understand the larger context of our work- what historians do and what history is and is not," in what exactly do they place their trust?¹⁵⁷ "Museum" as an idea becomes its own conceptual heuristic, a disembodied force for the portrayal of authentic and objective knowledge. If any figure is imagined behind the museum's curtain, it is likely those at the top and not frontline employees who become the synecdochic representatives of the museum's good work. As decision-makers who plan to incubate new and diverse artists or job creators offering resources to refugees and returning citizens, there is an added challenge— even for those fully intending to bargain in good faith— in being seen as an oppositional force to such munificent figures. "These are liberal progressive people," Howard Z. Robbins, a legal representative for administrators at the Tenement Museum, MoMA and New Museum among others, told the New York Times. "It's bizarre they are being demonized as if they're Henry Clay Frick."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷Gardner, "Contested Terrain", 15.

¹⁵⁸Harris and Pogrebin, "Inside Hushed Museum Hallways, a Rumble Over Pay Grows Louder."

From tourism's beginnings as elitist travel to sites of natural wonders to the development of mass consumer tourism, the journey to these historic sites have long been seen as a pilgrimage of sorts, a chance to pay respects at the site of mass tragedy, the home of a beloved author, or the birthplace of a country. "[Tourists] hope to enter a world separated from the world of their familiar, daily routine and to contact a transcendent reality," writes John F. Sears.¹⁵⁹ Even with the establishment of living history sites in the mid-to-late 20th century, which tended to memorialize the familiar, daily routine of ordinary life, visitors were enchanted by the sheer democratization of such spaces, which could be enjoyed without any prior education or knowledge as a prerequisite. This simulacra of the ordinary also offered an unspoken promise to a vast public: your everyday, your cooking and cleaning and tending house, is important and will be remembered.

But when stewards of the ordinary, such as the frontline staff at history museums and living history sites, take off their tri-cornered hats and take to the street in protest, the illusion shatters. Museums become corporations instead of shrines. And though museum leadership seems starkly different from the archetype of an overpaid corporate CEO to the public, it's language that makes sense to a board of directors. Museum leadership benefits from a distinction drawn by the public between conceptions of them as corporatized figures versus cultural warriors, but when it comes to making valuative decisions about budgeting for labor within an organization, the "liberal progressive" CEO's are easily understood as decision-makers and leaders by corporate board

¹⁵⁹John F. Sears, *Sacred Places : American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 210.

members. Perhaps much less digestible, however, are roles like ‘curator’, ‘archivist’ and “interpreter.”

Members of the “public” (individuals who work outside the cultural sector, who may wind up sitting on nonprofit boards) trust museums as unmediated spaces for learning history, the effects of which can already be seen in a broad perception of cultural work that vastly undermines the value created in the labor of mediation. This, combined with a general misperception of the impact organized labor can have on a workplace, certainly suggests that the generation of public support for cultural labor activism will be an uphill battle.

When the New York Times article, *Inside Hushed Museum Hallways, a Rumble Over Pay Grows Louder*, was published amidst a wave of union fervor in July of 2019, it was one of the first broad surveys of the movement outside of trade-specific blogs and news sites. The piece received several comments, and while online comments are often inflammatory and cannot be taken as fully representative of public opinion, the various discussions happening within the comments thread can provide some insight into public perception on this movement.¹⁶⁰

First, the vast majority of comments were from those inside the industry, offering support for the movement or sharing their own experience of wage stagnation, which reifies the belief that awareness of this movement thus far has mostly remained within cultural circles. Some within the field, however, commented to suggest that hope in unions had been misplaced. “I was fortunate enough to work in membership at MoMA

¹⁶⁰ Elizabeth A. Harris and Robin Pogrebin, “Inside Hushed Museum Hallways, a Rumble Over Pay Grows Louder,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 2019, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/22/arts/museum-pay-unions.html>.

throughout my 20's," one commenter wrote. "I always knew I was never going to make a ton of money there and that it was a very specific time in my life ... Of course people need to be paid a living wage, but working in a place like MoMA is a privilege." Another commenter echoed Howard Z. Robbins' defense of museum leadership: "Has anyone ever heard of the law of supply and demand? ... The reasons the salaries are low must be related to the abundance of people who are willing to work in a desirable sector. I don't think a union is going to fundamentally alter that situation," they wrote. "All this hand-wringing about directors' salaries also seems misplaced. Very talented and successful directors ... are still making a fraction of what very average corporate lawyers and finance professionals in New York make. The directors are shouldering much more stress and responsibility than any curator or art-handler."

For those (presumably) outside of the field, responses were decidedly brusquer: "None of these jobs are productive for society," said one commenter. "Get a real career, losers."

"[Unions] represent the interests of working people whose livelihood depends upon capital investment and profits," Amanda Coles writes in *Creative Class Politics*. "As such, unions face enduring tensions between their capacity to mobilize class interests as social movements, and the accommodation of class interests within institutions."¹⁶¹ When it comes to organizing in nonprofits, there's even more to consider, navigating between inchoate social revolution, job security, personal investment in the cause, and

¹⁶¹ Amanda Coles, "Creative Class Politics: Unions and the Creative Economy," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 22, no. 3 (May 26, 2016): 456–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2014.994612>.

the risk of unintentionally becoming the villain in one's own story. Just as Reagan was able to forever change the state of the union by leveraging a narrative of the greedy union member putting an undue burden on taxpayers, cultural union activists must remain wary of the precarious position both unions and museums-as-trustworthy-institutions hold in the public's mind.

Certainly, most museum leaders today are not, indeed, Henry Clay Frick. But neither are cultural activists a band of armed, violent strikers. In order to turn the tide of public opinion, and thus of fellow frontline staff, board members, and eventually even leadership, cultural workers must continue to paint a clear picture of what they do and why it matters. After all, despite a sweeping trend of union busting and anti-union rhetoric within the recent movement, this ultimately isn't a story of good versus evil.

When it comes to the throngs of underpaid and exhausted museum workers putting their careers on the line for a fight they believe in, it's a hero's origin story.

CONCLUSION

THE STATE OF THE UNION

“Protest is an indispensable element of [this movement],” artist and leading voice in the movement Andrea Fraser said in a recent discussion with Michelle Millar-Fisher, co-founder of the Arts and Museum Transparency Spreadsheet. “But transforming organizational governance can’t just be about getting a few toxic trustees off boards, which implies that the system is okay without them. It has to be about demanding a seat at the table.”¹⁶²

And it’s true: evidence from union attempts over the past thirty years has shown that attempts to voice organization concerns directly to museum management has largely fallen on deaf ears. Frontline staff have been forced into intimidating, one-on-one meetings with leadership, despite attempting collectively to cite complaints, and threatened with reduced hours or thwarted advancement. Entire departments have been laid off in the name of “restructuring.” And in one extreme case, an entire museum simply closed down.

It is clear that success in this movement hinges on activism from the bottom up. But demanding a seat at the table may be easier said than done. How do we do it when the table is over-crowded with corporate board members and a leadership team publicly lauded as activists, many who never worked on a museum’s frontlines. How do we do it when staff on the lowest rungs must clamber among the chairs, searching desperately for an opening, after shouting their content over the sounds of a thunderstorm, or worrying

¹⁶²Andrea Fraser and Michelle Millar Fisher, “Why Are Museums So Plutocratic, and What Can We Do About It?,” *Frieze*, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://frieze.com/article/why-are-museums-so-plutocratic-and-what-can-we-do-about-it>.

about an unsupervised seventeenth-century village. Perhaps they have to run off to the second job they've taken in order to pay down their student loans; maybe they have to run a mile just to keep their health premiums low. When the job is demanding, when is there time to make demands?

Further, successful, collective, from-the-ground-up action requires solidarity: a unified coalition of individuals committed to achieving their goals through careful and tedious planning. "I did not understand at the beginning of the process how long it takes and how much time, effort, stress, and emotions are required from leadership," wrote tour guide and organizer Emma. "There have been folks currently working on unionizing who have asked for advice. I have said 'Imagine how hard you think this is going to be. How long it's going to take. How much time and energy you will have to donate. How stressed you will be. How angry you will get. Then multiply that by 100. That will get you close to the reality!'"¹⁶³

I have used the term "movement" throughout this thesis because it's what I truly believe this moment to be, not a trend. Yet in 1971, when PASTA made history with the first-ever professional union, setting the cultural world ablaze with talk of deep, structural change, it surely wasn't seen as a trend either. Movements, too, can fade.

Two years ago, in March of 2018, Alli Hartley, a former organizer from the DC chapter of the ultimately-fizzled Museum Workers Speak, posted a blog with what she believed were key issues in the growing discussion on museums and labor. Reflecting on the decision, nearly two years prior, to end their chapter meetings for Museum Workers Speak, Hartley echoed the refrain that this must be a bottom-up movement, but with an

¹⁶³Emma, email to the author, February 10, 2020.

important caveat: “Unless it’s someone’s job to research, study and propose solutions to issues of museums and labor,” she wrote, “no one is going to care.”¹⁶⁴ She then went further, calling on professional organizations—who exist, in theory, to find ways to improve the field and the lives of professionals within it—to become key players in the support of this work. “What have professional organizations been doing about the labor issue?” she asked. “Is there anyone whose job it is to think, research, write and work with membership constituencies about solutions? Have professional organizations taken this on in any meaningful way?”¹⁶⁵

I will echo Hartley’s point here: ensuring the longevity of this work will require a sustainable restructuring of the field, one that builds on existing connective infrastructure such as professional associations to connect disparate movements and unfinished conversations. This kind of structural support could take a number of forms, and I offer some suggestions below, with feasibility levels from painless to pipe dream. But however this shift takes shape, it cannot happen by continuing to outsource work to the incredible, but exhausted, activists in the field: it must come from within. And it must come with a paycheck.

Some potential ways this shift might take place:

Increase channels of communication. The most crucial parts of movement-building in the past year has been moments that brought the field into mass dialogue,

¹⁶⁴Alli Hartley, “The Care and Keeping of Museum Workers — A Two Years Later Reflection,” Medium, March 17, 2018, <https://medium.com/@allihartley/the-care-and-keeping-of-museum-workers-a-two-years-later-reflection-f7cc334c45db>.

¹⁶⁵Alli Hartley, “The Care and Keeping of Museum Workers”

such as the salary-sharing during the spreadsheet's initial circulation. Twitter has also proven to be an excellent place for generating inter-field conversations: Arts and Museum Transparency Collective posts and retweets regularly, keeping the community abreast of the latest news in cultural organizing and posing questions to encourage dialogue about common issues within the field. Most museum union groups have their own Twitter page as well, offering support when union news breaks at other institutions.¹⁶⁶ As a field, finding ways to continue communicating— laughing, venting, and breathing— will be crucial in developing a common cause. Other methods might include something like a 'Frontline Museum Workers' slack channel, with conversation channels like #crazyvisitorstories or #thingsmymanagersays, not to mention spaces for sharing union news, encouragement and advice.

Institutional partnerships with professional associations with benefits for frontline employees. As I will discuss below, any major structural change within the cultural field will likely rely on support from one of the industry's major professional associations, such as the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) or National Council on Public History (NCPH). One relatively simple service of these organizations could be institutional partnerships granting automatic enrollment into the organization as a benefit of employment. While the cost of membership to an association like NCPH is by no means egregious at \$74 for an individual and \$45 for a new professional (someone employed less than three years in the field), the cost could nonetheless be prohibitive for

¹⁶⁶The Art and Museum Transparency group can be found at @amtransparency. Other unions with a twitter presence include: @MA_Union, @ncm_union, @Bellringers26, @tenementmuseum_union

part-time workers making, in many cases, under \$10 per hour.¹⁶⁷ And while NCPH does offer institutional partnerships with subscriptions to *The Public Historian* and discounts to the annual meeting, such partners are mostly university history departments.¹⁶⁸ NCPH could offer an institutional partnership level that provides a certain selection of benefits to all employees of a particular organization. At the very least, employees could receive the Public History News Update weekly newsletter and one paid registration, that must be used by a non-supervisory staff member, to the annual conference. This simple act could go a long way in making all those who do public historical work— whether in their first museum job, just passing through, or from a so-called “non-traditional” museum background like the Penn Museum’s Global Guides— feel more like public historians.

Unions for all, for all. Across the country, from New York to Boston, from Milwaukee to Los Angeles, public historical and arts organizations struggle to unionize against public misconceptions about contemporary union membership and claims from leadership that union representatives simply don’t understand how museums work. While such statements represent the exact kind of classism unionizing workers hope to move against, it certainly invites reflection: could there be a historian’s union?

There is certainly a precedent for unions and labor affiliations for precarious workforces. If an existing association like AAM or NCPH wanted to take on this kind of work, with the basic infrastructure already in place, they could look to examples in the

¹⁶⁷“Join Us,” National Council on Public History, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://ncph.org/about/join-us/>.

¹⁶⁸“National Council on Public History | Patrons & Partners,” accessed February 28, 2020, <https://ncph.org/about/patrons-partners/>.

U.S. Freelancer’s Union, the Actor’s Equity Association, or W.A.G.E.¹⁶⁹ Each of these organizations function differently and are tailored to their specific field, but offer a range of workplace protections, support, and even the opportunity to buy union-subsidized health insurance.

Following an Actor’s Equity model, which requires actors either to sign a contract for an equity-aligned production or accumulate hours towards a full membership, an organization like NCPH could approve particular public historical projects as eligible towards the union. This would allow for even “non-professional” public historians, such as community members engaged in a local history and urban renewal projects, to accumulate credits towards eventual union representation. And while a “historian’s union” provided through a professional association may not have the resources to negotiate contracts at individual sites, they could easily adopt a model similar to that created in 2008 by W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy). On top of hosting lectures, workshops and collecting data on the state of artistic labor, W.A.G.E. created a certification program for institutions that meet their standard of payment for artist’s fees. NCPH and AAM could offer similar programs, offering certifications (with incentives) to institutions that pay frontline employees what the associations deem an acceptable minimum wage. A similar tactic was used more than a decade ago by the American Library Association’s Allied Professional Association (ALA-APA) when, in 2008, they endorsed a recommended minimum salary for library professionals.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹“About Us,” Freelancers Union, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://www.freelancersunion.org/about/>.; “Actors’ Equity Association,” accessed February 28, 2020, <http://www.actorsequity.org.>; “Working Artists and the Greater Economy,” W.A.G.E., accessed February 28, 2020, <https://wageforwork.com/home#top>.

¹⁷⁰“Minimum Salaries by State,” accessed February 28, 2020, <https://ala-apa.org/improving-salariesstatus/resources/minimum-salaries-by-state/>.

Anyone who has worked on the frontline at a public historical site has likely experienced a moment (or several) of recognizing the talent and ability of those that surround them: witnessing a coworker go above and beyond for a guest, watching a visitor have a genuine “aha” moment because of something an interpreter said. Or perhaps it’s something they experience when playing visitor themselves: a thrilling tour, a moment where history comes life. But for those working in service of the past, they can all too easily be recast in the minds of leadership as expendable soldiers, willing to sacrifice themselves in the name of history’s great cause. For a long time, this is what it has meant to be on the frontlines.

Now, public historians have joined a different fight, one more than fifty years in the making. And rather than waging a war in the name of history, history itself must serve as an ally. Public historians are storytellers, instigators, activists. They are scholars and producers of knowledge. They know how to care for and support those around them, and they certainly aren’t afraid to get dirty.

Who better to begin— and win— a revolution?

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