Heritage Institutions, Resistance, and Praxis

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Abstract: Heritage institutions traditionally function as subtle hegemonic devices for the production and public representation of knowledge, meaning, and belonging. This article looks at the role of public intellectuals called heritage interpreters who work at heritage institutions as agents of knowledge production. The concept of the public sphere is considered in relation to Gramsci’s ideas on hegemony, the intellectual, and praxis to offer an expanded view of communicative production at heritage institutions. The article explores the interpreter’s role resisting ideological hegemony and commodification, and in creating spaces and conversations for alternative imaginings of and struggle toward public knowledge and radical pedagogy.

Keywords: Museums; Heritage; Public intellectuals; Public interest; Praxis; Interpreters

Heritage institutions such as museums and historic sites traditionally function as subtle hegemonic devices for the production and public representation of knowledge, meaning, and belonging. By their very presentation at a heritage site, ideas are fixed, authenticated, and made credible in the minds of the public. Expressions of non-dominant players may be excluded and “othered” or appropriated and encompassed by this system, and through public exhibits made digestible to the public.
dominant culture. Recent moves to commodify heritage institutions reinforce appropriation, as institutional architecture, blockbuster exhibits, and cultural products become objects for sale. Within the walls of the institutions themselves, some public servants work to resist both commodification and ideological hegemony by using these spaces as local sites of conversation. These practitioners, known as heritage interpreters, bring to their communication work a depth of idealism and desire to work in the public interest—a powerful devotion to praxis—while at the same time serving as employees under neoliberal policies. How do they avoid their own smothering—do they adapt to, change, resist, or surrender to the forces of bureaucracy or capitalism?

This article looks at public knowledge presented at these institutions and the role of public intellectuals such as interpreters who work for Western government-funded heritage sites as agents of cultural and communicative production. An essential part of this exploration will be a consideration of the concept of the public sphere in relation to Gramsci’s ideas on hegemony, the intellectual, and praxis. It will use the expanded view of political economy especially as it relates to cultural production and communicative praxis—the linking of theory with actual experience. The article introduces a worker’s perspective on heritage institutions as places of radical pedagogy. It looks at some of the challenges faced by interpreters as they try to create spaces and conversations for alternative ideas about heritage knowledge. The article flags possibilities for further study of the heritage interpreter’s role in communicative production at these institutions.

Public sphere, public knowledge

Habermas introduced the concept of the public sphere as a space of rational discourse where citizens would engage in face-to-face communication about issues of public interest. While extensively criticized as an ideal type that brackets difference such as gender or race, the theory is useful in conceptualizing communicative processes or spaces that lie on the margins of state or marketplace where representations, negotiations, and disagreements about ideas can take place. For communication scholars, the public sphere is important because it privileges the critical analysis of democracy, citizenship, and public opinion/the public interest rather than economic considerations (Mosco, 1996).

A key question in the debate about the public sphere is participation and access (e.g., Fraser, 1993; Ku, 2000). Whose ideas are inserted and expressed in this communicative process, and to what extent do dominant cultural ideas monopolize the public conversation? State, civil, and market actors all contribute what can be called public knowledge to the public domain through many forms of communicative media and institutions. Although the term has been more specifically used by communication scholars to refer to open knowledge and the communicative commons in digital environments, I propose to use public knowledge more broadly to indicate that “content” various actors contribute to the sphere of general discourse. The state contributes public knowledge that is formalized as official knowledge. Through its authority and expertise, these ideas are accepted as legitimate or authoritative. The marketplace offers information and ideas
through various media and cultural forms that clearly suit its goals of economic gain. Civil society serves as a more informal source of diverse public knowledge and arena of struggles (Ku, 2000). Through civil society’s complex mélange of institutions, organizations, and media, non-dominant actors can offer their voices and critical public opinions.

Habermas was concerned about social changes that bureaucratized, industrialized, and commodified public communication (Ku, 2000). He criticized the tendency of mass media to characterize public knowledge as a capitalist product, for this limited the opportunities for critical public debate. Information in this form is seen as content used to attract readers or viewers or ticket-buyers, who exchange money to use the content-product or are themselves sold as product to advertisers. This market view of public knowledge is increasingly being adopted by the state, where previously free information such as archive services or government reports require user fees or the dissemination of information is subject to control to assure its political or economic benefit. Garnham (2001) describes how the state traditionally subsidized areas involving public knowledge—newspapers, public libraries, public education. Culture and information under this perspective were seen as social goods. But he points out that since the 1980s “the increasing sway of capitalist logic” has forced the state to “work increasingly through direct exchange relations within the economic” (2001, p. 241).

Political economists have studied this blurring of boundaries between the “private” of market forces and the “public” as common to all, and the conditions around unequal access to the public sphere. Of interest here is the possibility within critical political economy to address basic moral questions of the public interest. Mosco (1996) asserts the need to identify the gaps between hegemonic common sense that assures society all is well, and lived experience that tells many groups all is not well in society. This idea of a moral gap between common sense and lived experience, the assumed and the real, was important to Antonio Gramsci. His concept of hegemony maintained that the ideas and values of the dominant class are agreed to—accepted as common sense—by the subordinate classes through the control, production, and use of symbolic representations. If ideology, as succinctly defined by Thompson, is “meaning in the service of power” (1990, p. 7), then hegemony is the consent given by most of society to those meanings. Public knowledge can be seen as one form of this meaning sometimes used in the service of power, or even more broadly as common sense, the socializations that keep society in line. But should one frame the term “public knowledge” as knowledge in the service of power, or knowledge in the service of the public?

Hegemonic power, according to Mosco, is built from social relationships that require complicity across class, gender, and so on. Since they require consent, ideologies might not necessarily be reproduced, and instead are subject to resistance and subversion and the “potential for alternative forms of common sense” (1996, p. 243). Forms of public knowledge that take a critical stance help to question the consent and offer alternatives. Gramsci wrote that social change required the
development of alternative hegemonies rooted in lived experience. He advocated the creation of critical social actors, public intellectuals, who would question public knowledge that served power and would work to create their own common sense, based on lived experience, for the public good (Burke, 1999).

Cultural production and reproduction
Following these theoretical perspectives, one can conclude that the dominant elite’s ability to exercise hegemony over the production of symbolic representations and the reproduction of its concepts and values is the key to its political and economic success. The public sphere is both the abstract arena and the sociocultural process for the presentation and reproduction of dominant ideology—or public knowledge in the service of power. Meanings are produced, inserted in the public sphere, then experienced, accepted, and passed on by members of society. Production of public knowledge is not enough; mere consumption is not enough—acceptance and reproduction is essential for dominant ideologies to survive. The moment that these meanings are learned is the moment of reproduction; the moment they are critically assessed and rejected or modified is the moment when reproduction fails. Control of production (thereby limiting the public knowledge available) and of reproduction (limiting critical thought or oppositional interpretations) ensures success of dominant social ideologies.

Heritage institutions such as museums, parks, and historic sites present knowledge in the public sphere and facilitate its reproduction. Heritage institutions seem to fulfill Habermas’ ideal public sphere through their scientific, objective stance on knowledge and position as public fora, theoretically accessible to all, where large numbers of people gather for events, programs, and lectures. Habermas himself viewed museums as public places in the same light as coffeehouses and salons, serving bourgeois society. Current museum and heritage literature addresses how the historic functioning of these institutions—as nineteenth-century institutions for civilizing the masses, as conscious arbiters of taste and ethnic superiority, and as material manifestations of colonial power—reinforced ideological domination of the elite classes (e.g., Bailkin, 2002; Hooper-Greenhill, 2003). Bennett (2004) for example, situates the development of European museums in the context of the emergence of markets, bourgeois civil society, and liberal forms of government. Through their practices of collection, preservation, research, and presentation, institutions placed both cultural and natural objects within an evolutionary conceptual framework (Bennett, 2004). Representations in the form of exhibitions offered rhetorical modes of communication; ideas were ordered, homogenized, universalized, and imbued with an aura of authenticity. The official, institutional nature of such heritage knowledge, characterized as tradition, assured its acceptance as authoritative. This was reinforced by combined objectives of pedagogy and entertainment to ensure successful reproduction of dominant ways of looking at the world.

In recent years, this knowledge has been increasingly turned into a contained, definable commodity to be consumed in leisure time, further aligning heritage sites with dominant capitalist ideologies. Heritage knowledge then becomes a
product to compete with theme park and cultural entertainment for patrons’ attention and tourist dollars (Heron, 2000). Relationships with the public turn consumerist rather than social or cultural, influencing the types of public knowledge produced and the communications media used. Commodification elevates entertainment, pleasure, and spectacle as the primary objectives for heritage institutions, both to serve consumer demand and maximize the number of customers through the door. Although instruments of the dominant class—whether agents of the state or commodified actors in the tourism/entertainment marketplace—spectacular, entertaining, and nostalgic exhibitions enhance the likelihood that audiences will enjoy, approve of, and consent to the underlying ideologies offered.

**Knowledge production and the public intellectual**

Consent to dominant ideologies is secured and reproduced through the education objectives of heritage institutions. They share this function with schools and other official sites of pedagogy. But this is not a simple case of communicative transmission—like schools, heritage institutions are also sites of struggle through the audience’s meaning-making activities and through their institutional processes of knowledge production. It is through these social processes that heritage institutions potentially serve not just as communicators of ideological knowledge, but as fora for negotiation and resistance. Much research has been undertaken in the museum sphere on how visitors learn in an institutional setting, the importance of first-hand educational experiences, and how small-group social interaction facilitates knowledge production (e.g., Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2000). But little scholarly research has been produced on the role of the institutional workers in the production of public knowledge. The people who actually produce the content for representation or the commodities for sale can play an important part in the nature of that knowledge. Garnham (2001) calls these labourers “ideological workers”—specialists who labour in superstructural institutions. These workers are important to our discussion because critical perspectives on the institutions of the public sphere often come from the workers themselves. Gramsci saw these workers as public intellectuals. For him, the role of the intellectual was a crucial one in the creation of a counter hegemony (Burke, 1999). In Gramsci’s view, intellectuals produced by the educational system—technocrats and professionals—performed thinking and organizing functions for the dominant social group. Through this group, the ruling class maintained hegemony over the rest of society. He argued that the transformation away from hegemonic capitalism required a different group of intellectuals acting for the working class (Borg, Buttigieg, & Mayo, 2002).

Gramsci felt that social change could only happen through education, in civil society outside the state, with the assistance of these new intellectuals (Borg, Buttigieg, & Mayo, 2002). They would help workers realize their own consciousness by linking theory with lived experience and by training people to be critical, conscious, and disciplined. This would help them develop tools to recognize and change hegemonic institutions. Reflecting Gramsci’s vision, Mosco (1996) calls on the development of new intellectual leadership who can expose the gap
between hegemonic common sense and lived experience, and propose alternative hegemonies. Gramsci felt the divide between the intellectual and the worker, thought and experience, mistakenly seen as a gap between elites and populists, would be bridged by developing critical, reflective knowledge in both the intellectual and the worker—through praxis (Fontana, 2002). Mosco sees praxis, the bringing together of theory and lived experience, as a form of social intervention, “free and creative activity by which people produce and change the world and themselves” (1996, p. 37). Praxis is not labour, associated with production, but relates more to Habermas’ communicative action or creativity, where the intellectual operates. To Gramsci, educators, especially adult educators, were public intellectuals involved with praxis—teachers facilitating knowledge production and instrumental agents of creative social change (Fontana, 2002).

**Heritage interpreters and praxis**

It is here outside of the state, outside of education, and somehow on the periphery of social intervention that I wish to situate a particular public servant, the “interpreter,” who offers programs or produces media for public audiences in museums, parks, and historic sites. Because heritage sites seem to function as institutions of hegemony, it is easy to perceive their public-knowledge work in terms of technocratic intellectuals. Experts, professionals, and technocrats all play a role in producing cultural and historical knowledge for public audiences. But I am interested in the way that interpreters are able to resist and subvert both commodification and ideological hegemony by using these spaces as local sites of conversation. Heritage interpreters not only present public knowledge as a public good, but many seek to increase the public’s awareness of and personal responsibility for a range of social issues—bringing to their work a powerful devotion to praxis. Interpretation is defined by the Canadian professional association as “any communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of cultural and natural heritage to the public, through first-hand involvement with an object, artifact, landscape or site” (Interpretation Canada, 1976). Interpreters see themselves as explainers and facilitators. They might be better known as tour guides, naturalists, educators, visitor services staff, or resource managers, but many see themselves as something different, and something more (Ham, 2002). Can these workers be considered alternative intellectuals in the Gramscian sense? Passionate, located outside mainstream educational systems, dedicated to face-to-face communication, concerned with linking theory to first-hand experience, and intent on changing the lives of people—many interpreters seem to fulfill the criteria of radical pedagogists.

The foundational text for heritage interpreters, Freeman Tilden’s *Interpreting Our Heritage*, first published in 1957, resonates with ideas that could be missing pages from Gramsci’s prison notebooks. Tilden felt interpretation was not instruction but provocation. Its purpose was to stimulate a person to widen their horizon of interests and knowledge, and to gain an understanding of the “larger truths that lie behind any statements of facts” (Tilden, 1977, p. 8). He maintained that interpretation was an art that revealed holistic meanings and relationships using first-
hand experiences and addressing the whole person. While interpretation has its roots in Romanticism, the late-nineteenth-century aesthetic movement, and early American conservationists such as John Muir, it was the radicalism of the 1960s and the quest for “authentic” experience that galvanized some public servants working in government-run parks and cultural history sites to articulate a radical position for their work. The environmental movement that coalesced in the late 1960s and early 1970s drew many idealistic middle-class people into the park services in North America and Europe with the goal of changing the world. While initially these interpreters were naturalists, in the 1970s the professional associations expanded their self-definitions to encompass workers in a broader range of heritage institutions. The concept of heritage they used were those tangible and intangible things both natural and cultural that society wants to keep and pass on to future generations. What linked them to others in their chosen field was the concern with revealing meanings—a self-perception that regardless of the subject matter, what they did was a communicative process (Veverka, 1994). Some interpreters used this process to undertake radical pedagogy in environmental, aboriginal, heritage protection, and nationalist issues. For them, working as an interpreter was a way of instituting social change from within the system.

Although interpreters have written extensively in professional journals about their communicative practices in “informal learning environments,” scholarly research linking them to Gramsci’s theories of hegemony, the role of public intellectuals, and praxis has not been undertaken. To explore how these public intellectuals perceive their work and their role within heritage institutions, I began a pilot empirical project in the summer of 2005 with the cooperation of two professional groups, Interpretation Canada (IC) and Britain’s Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI). Information was collected from practising interpreters in Canada and Britain in the summer and fall of 2005. A non-representative sample of 39 participants was contacted using e-mail questions, and, for the purposes of this article, 14 of their responses are analyzed and summarized. Their identities have been concealed in this article to protect their privacy. While the following information can only offer an initial description of the conditions of communicative production from the worker’s point of view, it suggests possibilities for further research into interpretation as radical pedagogy.

The occupational profile of respondents reflects the structure of the profession as a whole. The majority were aged 35 to 50, female, White, and worked for parks, historic sites, and museums. Three were consultants so worked across locations. All but two held university degrees at master’s or PhD levels. According to Interpretation Canada and AHI, these characteristics reflect the nature of the permanent work force today employed in both Canada and Britain—female, highly educated, and white. Although there are no data on the number of interpreters working in the field, as of 2005 the U.S.-based National Association for Interpretation (NAI) boasted 4,300 individual and institutional memberships, while Interpretation Canada had 282 individual and institutional memberships (representing an estimated 500 members). These figures are small compared to the legions of
part-time or volunteer workers (estimated by the NAI at half a million in the U.S.) who provide the bulk of face-to-face contact with visitors at heritage sites and institutions. Because the profession is closely tied to serving tourists or school groups, the cycle of work is seasonal, with large numbers of temporary workers hired or volunteering May to September. According to IC, seasonal interpreters tend to be students in fields such as biology or history, selected because of their communicative skills. Summer jobs in parks, museums, and historic sites are the entry points for new interpreters, and staff are trained in interpretive methods during pre-season workshops. Institutions rely on either senior interpretive staff or the professional associations for worker training. IC, AHI, and the larger NAI offer similar seasonal training sessions, plus annual professional-development events for full-time interpreters. The content of these programs in all three countries has survived relatively unchanged since the Tilden-based programs of the 1970s. Thus the basic principles and techniques of interpretation live on, with their emphasis on first-hand resources; communicative techniques such as tours, talks, and interactive media; and audience experiences and relationships. If the interpreter continues in the profession, some move up into middle-management jobs away from visitor contact, focusing on planning, administration, or school programs during the off-season. Other senior interpreters may tie together a string of extended seasonal jobs to remain as front-line interpreters.

This study explored to what extent these workers can be considered, in the Gramscian sense, radical public-knowledge intellectuals and pedagogists. In a very practical sense all interpreters are public intellectuals—public in the sense that they function in real spaces in the public sphere, and intellectuals in the sense that they have advanced expertise about aspects of cultural or natural history. What emerged clearly from these particular respondents was their motivation. Despite, in many cases, working almost two decades and more in the field, the underlying reason they continued to work as interpreters was a passionate desire to share their knowledge with others, and a feeling that this was a profession that was somehow “different” than any other. When asked about motivations, these interpreters consistently expressed this passion, eloquently detailed by Stephanie, experienced in parks and museums across Canada:

I love sharing my knowledge of things I am passionate about. I love learning myself. I love the diversity—no day is ever the same. ... I love the outdoors and being active. I love thinking. I love being around history. I love meeting new people and hearing their stories. I guess my motivation to work in the field is sort of selfish. It’s a passion that I can get paid to do. Every day I look forward to going to work and that’s important to me. I don’t want to separate my work from my passions. I want to live them every day.

The idea of “life experience” seemed key to these interpreters, like one Briton who found that engaging with nature and history was personally “life-enhancing” or a Canadian who found that through learning, “a site visit becomes a life experience.” Neil, a British consultant who was both teacher and countryside interpreter, said:
The underlying motivation is still about changing the world (or “making a difference”) along the lines that Tilden postulated all those years ago—encouraging protection/conservation of our heritage through interpretation via understanding and appreciation. Now, as then, it is about a way of life not just merely earning a living.

Environmentalism, love of nature, love of art, self-discovery, and “living the passion” were common underlying motivations for respondents in both Canada and the U.K. Among the Canadians, a unique thread had a nationalist bent, “helping people come to know the fascinating stories that make our country unique.” As the workers on the front line actually communicating with the public, these interpreters expressed that their purpose was to raise public awareness of the whole story—or Tilden’s “larger truths”—behind any issue. In some of the responses, this reflected a politically activist stance. Said one British respondent, “My motivations are to facilitate organizations and people to become an integral voice in debates and discussions about the joys, obstacles, and politics of public spaces.” Another, an Albertan, actively worked to reveal “larger truths”:

There are certain topics and facts that we are encouraged to “de-emphasize” in the course of interpretation. One example is discussion of the Communist nature of many community halls and organizations in the 1920s and 1930s in rural Ukrainian communities. It is feared that the general public will not fully understand the difference between the “Alberta brand” of socialism (farmers’ rights) that existed then and the more negative connotations . . . . Personally, I do not shy away from this topic . . . . Instead, we must work to present that information in a way that will clear up confusion and stereotypes. Nothing is gained from ignoring parts of history that we may not look upon favourably these days.

Such radical sentiments surfaced in comments from several respondents. The question of whether such radical motivations are representative, and whether independent decision-making on the nature of the knowledge publicly presented is common within the larger occupation overall, for example in volunteer or recently recruited interpreters, offers possibilities for future research.

The techniques used by these workers also suggest counter-hegemonic tendencies. Their practices employ face-to-face, dialogic communication; stress first-hand interaction with real environments or people; emphasize process not media; and focus on audiences. Although heritage institutions might promote various media such as exhibits that use a rhetorical mode of address, it is the dialogic approach valued by Habermas that characterizes interpretation. This is what allowed those interviewed to express their passion and is the part many respondents were most stimulated by. “I loved working with and communicating directly with the public,” says one living-history interpreter. “I love history and want to share this directly with others.” Thompson (1990) notes that part of what constitutes modern society as modern, and one source of alienation, is the lack of face-to-face interaction in the exchange of symbolic forms. Modern media are not dialogic; there is not a formative dialogue between communicative partners, sharing a give-and-take conversation. But this is what the interpretation profes-
sion sees as its most effective technique. The interviewed interpreters expressed a passion for their subject matter and their dialogic methods. The nature of face-to-face interpretation is such that audiences do not respond passively but tend to demand an interactive relationship with the interpreter. Indeed, from the experience of the veteran workers, the best programs are those where real dialogue emerges and a sense of social relationship between interpreter and recipient results.

Linked to this is the idea that “real” interpretation does not rely on mediation, which distances audiences, and if it must, strives to replicate the strengths of face-to-face interpretation (Tilden, 1977). Theatrical performance, immersive film or audiovisual, and interactive computer sites are examples of mediated interpretation with face-to-face affects. Tilden stressed the importance of first-hand experience with people, places, or things. The most effective interpretation is authentic, is tactile, is on-site, or uses sensory perceptions. This material interaction with a landscape, an object, or a human being creates a lasting impression. Brochures and exhibit panels are not considered real interpretation unless they encourage readers to experience something first-hand. “What really matters,” according to one long-time interpreter, “is the experience itself—having a chance to enjoy the fresh air and views, or to go canoeing or climbing.” Face-to-face or first-hand experiences have also been connected to desired tourist experiences of authenticity (Dicks, 2000). Said Pam, an interpreter at an ethnic living-history site,

You can read all the books written about a certain place and see hundreds, even thousands, of images of that place, but I believe that you do not fully understand or appreciate that place until you go there and experience it first hand. As a first-person interpreter, I foster the connections that visitors to this site make by providing both tangible and intangible experiences and another human being to connect and relate to.

This emphasis on lived experience closely reflects Gramsci’s emphasis on praxis as a vehicle for long-term learning and social change. Facilitating meaning-making and converting knowledge into lived experience also implies an attitude to audiences that situates audience members more as students or participants in a dialogue. The raising of people’s awareness and self-knowledge, and eventual transformation into active social agents is a key concern of Tilden’s interpretation. Gramsci insisted that ideological struggle led to social change, and this struggle was not limited to consciousness raising but consciousness transformation (Burke, 1999). It was not something that could be imposed on people but must arise from their lived experience. And he felt that the production and development of consciousness or awareness required a dialectical process—conversation, not transmission (Borg et al., 2002). The intellectual realm, therefore, was not to be seen as something confined to an elite but as something interactive and grounded in relationships among the people. The interpreters surveyed here seemed to act as facilitators of this kind of intellectual transformation. To them, their job was to make connections between ideas and on-the-ground, immersive experience of nature or culture—the essence of praxis. Explained Janina:
It seemed natural to want to explain how farming has largely formed—and continues to maintain—the British countryside. The countryside is seen as “natural” by most people who aren’t professionally involved with it—but of course it isn’t at all. I felt it was becoming increasingly important to help people to make the mental link between the countryside and the food on their plate.

A key to the apparent success of this type of praxis is its location in two senses—its situation outside formal educational systems and the locations where the interpreters are physically operating. Gramsci saw the formal state education system as a primary hegemonic agent where the educational bureaucracy and its teachers reinforced universalist, capitalist norms (Fontana, 2002). The interviewed interpreters saw themselves as fairly free agents offering non-academic education that was never framed in words such as “education.” “Provocation,” “experiences,” or “revelation” were more fittingly the aims of their work. Tilden (1977) points out that interpreters, while ready to ally themselves with museum educators and environmental educators, were always clear in their differences with those more academic pursuits. Interpretation, since its beginnings as a movement of “happy amateurs,” operated in informal learning environments (p. 98). Like adult educators who assist individuals in achieving self-change, interpreters in Tilden’s conception sought to raise individuals’ awareness of and personal relationships to the natural and cultural world.

Not only did these respondents see themselves as operating outside traditional educational systems, several stressed how their location outside of mainstream governmental processes helped them to survive within a bureaucracy and act as critical, alternative voices. Many interpreters in Canada and some in the U.K. have their offices in small towns and natural areas far from government centres. The respondents also positioned themselves as outsiders within their organizations, even though several were managers. They voiced recurring ideas of isolation. Some were happy to be left alone, while others were frustrated by attempts to deal with bureaucratic hierarchies. Said Neil:

Sadly, I could not really cope with the “management role” . . . (an even squarer peg in a round hole for you!). As a “middle manager” I got really fed up with the politics and bureaucracy and conflict (I’m no good at handling conflict, it has dawned on me too late in life) and I was especially crap at the management bit too . . .

Their continued close contact with real cultural and natural environments served as the bedrock for the continued idealism of most respondents. Those who did not work in a park office or historic site on the edge of the countryside sought to return there at every opportunity.

Most maintained that it was continued contact with the real world that kept them sane and helped them retain creativity. Said one Briton: “I have always been very affected by whatever landscape I happen to find myself in. Therefore I find interpreting the landscape to be very stimulating work. I am also lucky enough to be able to use my creativity (design, photography, and writing) in my job—and this is vitally important to me.” A Canadian maintained, “What other job can you drop everything and run outside to watch in awe as a flock of tundra swans fly
over the office, knowing your boss would be right there with you?” Said another, “Who wants to work in a cubicle?” Most respondents in both countries felt that they had to develop strategies to keep their idealism and creativity going, and were harsh in their criticism of the effects of bureaucracy on their core functions and their style of operation. Said one long-time interpreter, now a trainer of other interpreters:

I felt like and was treated like a maverick on many occasions. Interpretation breeds creativity, risk-taking, flexibility, and people who have the skills to communicate with groups of people, yet, often, the very work environments that create them do not support ongoing employment opportunities for people with these skills.

Several others expressed the need to resist attempts to integrate what they did into mainstream bureaucracy. Working in small offices tucked into countryside or basement locations sometimes helped in this regard. Whether most interpreters feel freer to express radical opinions and offer controversial pedagogy because of their marginal location will be a future line of consideration.

Some interpreters indicated the need to get out and enjoy the countryside or working people as a way of keeping themselves motivated. Interactions with children kept others fresh. The support of fellow interpreters also seemed to be key, and there is a sense, during professional workshops, that camaraderie sustains interpreters as a whole in the face of bureaucratic smothering. But more importantly, respondents felt it was the job itself, or more correctly the job as they made it, that kept them stimulated and motivated. A veteran, Donna, related:

Being the person who leads others to the point of making their own discoveries, then the satisfaction of experiencing the “aha” with people keeps me coming back. That “feeling” keeps me coming back. I like making a difference and assisting those who want to learn that the world is about so much more than materialism.

A younger interpreter who entered the profession to explore her Ukrainian heritage remembered:

This man . . . had always heard his parents talk about the difficulties of their first years homesteading in Alberta, but had never thought much of it. Seeing a re-created burdei and speaking with two women living the same lifestyle his parents had told of truly moved this man. He sat down on a tree stump and cried. This was, he told us, the first time he had thoughts of appreciation for what his parents faced when they first arrived in Canada . . . . To someone just starting in the field of interpretation, this was very powerful and inspirational.

I saw how interpretation, more specifically first-person interpretation, connected the past and the present.

**Effects of neoliberalism**

While interpretation flourished under liberal welfare governments that perceived the activity as a public good, neoliberal policies starting in the 1980s greatly changed how these workers operated. Wu (2002) characterizes neoliberal governments by the way they drastically cut program funding in the arts and heritage
sector, re-organized the bureaucracy, and shifted toward business-oriented values. Wu studied the devastation that followed this decade of government budget slashing in the U.K. and the U.S. Starved of public funds, administrators of museums and other public-history institutions scrambled to organize volunteer labour, raise funds from the community, and compete for extremely limited partnerships with the private sector to run programs (see also Heron, 2000). Heritage interpreters increasingly had to operate under internal relationships driven by a business model. Interpretation was regarded by the new regimes either as a frill or only justified as a saleable product for culture and tourism centres.

Business-oriented objectives intensified the problems that the interviewed interpreters already had with bureaucracy and introduced issues related to commodification that changed the nature of their work. Job losses, the threat of job loss, and professionalization directly affected their work environment in both the U.K. and Canada. Menzies’ (1996) descriptions of the labour changes of the 1980s and 1990s echo the restructuring that took place in the public service in that period. She attributes the abandonment of public governance and regulation to reorganization based on market mechanisms. Loss of jobs, underemployment, deskilling or marginalizing of specialists’ work, contracting out, credentialism, and multiskilling were hallmarks of the market system. These factors also affected the lives of heritage interpreters.

A very real consequence was drastic loss in jobs. In Canada, the federal and many provincial governments re-organized heritage-related departments, and interpretation, seen as non-essential, was often axed (Searle, 2000). In 1984, for example, the Canadian Wildlife Service’s entire national network of public nature centres was disbanded. As late as 2002, the B.C. government laid off permanent provincial interpretation staff. As wages for the university-educated took a huge plunge in the 1980s, Menzies notes that “workers on the fringe—part-time, temporary, term contract, self-employment and other ‘contingent’ work” (p. 34) represented the bulk of new job growth in the period. Those working full time had to work more hours. The participants were asked whether this affected the underlying nature of the knowledge they offered and the public interests they served. Did the new paradigm smother any radical tendencies? One respondent, commenting on the Thatcher years in the U.K., found the introduction of neoliberal policies “totally depressing.”

I have a definite memory of wanting to leave the country until the evil woman was disposed, but chose in the end to stay and carry on working from within the system. But don’t forget that Thatcher’s policies continue with the Blair years—core work at the national park was being “projectised,” and things like “best value” were introduced. . . . And nowadays there’s a complete obsession with objectives and targets for things which can hardly be measured—like interpretation.

Most interviewees related similar stories of downsizing and restructuring. One complained that “the organization was putting more and more routine admin work on individual officers’ shoulders.” Another said, “I left after two years . . . totally
fed up and frustrated with local politics and bureaucracy and feeling all my energy and enthusiasm—to say nothing of the experience and qualifications I brought to the job—was being wasted and not appreciated.”

Garnham (2001) points out the unconscious constraints imposed on workers by fear of job loss. There is a greater likelihood here that previously autonomous workers will toe the line or adopt new values in the effort to stay employed. Garnham writes that management and staff internalize this coercive effect and mask it with words like “professionalize”—when workers professionalize, they comprehend as a group the “rules of the game” (Garnham, 2001, p. 239). Thompson and Findlay (1999) detail how new cultures in the workplace are internalized by employees. Casting off old ways of thinking and adopting new vision and mission statements—a key part of the re-organization of the Canadian public service in the 1980s—has created a new environment of values and practices that is product oriented. But they also note how workers’ resistance to the new culture can take less visible forms—“distancing behaviour, cynicism, deep acting and resigned behavioural compliance rather than value internalization” (p. 26). This reflects the thoughts of one naturalist from Alberta.

“I’m tired and frustrated and angry and burning out, but my experience, increase in knowledge (of nature, of process, of people, of bureaucracy) and increase in ability lead me to believe that I can still and am still making a difference . . . ”

Commodification had the tendency to change the job of heritage interpretation and the act of interpretation into products. As the public sector was downsized, some workers were hired by the private sector or turned to contract or consulting work. Ham (2002) describes how, in the 1980s, interpreters and their organizations increasingly strove to professionalize to prove their legitimacy and accountability in the eyes of management. Credentializing, quantitative measurement of outcomes and attendance, and systemized planning moved the interpreter from the status of happy amateur, promoted by Tilden, to communication professional. Interviewees complained they had to increasingly institutionalize their practices, justify their jobs, and, as Janina put it, “play by the game.” But professionalism is something that requires essentializing and standardizing. Interpretation, once a relationship-based practice, was increasingly bound within codes of behaviour.

Interpreters who lost their jobs in the 1980s and 1990s were sometimes hired on a project or consulting basis. Not only did this commodify their interpretive knowledge, any radical or critical stance would also be untenable. Some of these credentialized professionals created or joined larger companies, and now a few big consulting groups dominate the planning and production of interpretive media in each country (Dicks, 2000). This seemed to change not only the job of interpretation, but also the nature of the work. One U.K. consultant who works widely producing project-based heritage developments made a bittersweet comment doubting the benefits of the new-style interpretation:

Yes, it has changed. The longer I work in interpretation, the more peripheral it seems. I used to think interpretation was crucial to the process of establishing a
sense of connection between people and places, but I’m now starting to feel it’s just the icing on the cake. I’ve done quite a bit of research into how visitors use and respond to interpretation, and the results are very depressing—people don’t really get much from it at all.

Her comments reflect an interesting perception of how this communicative process works—that a relationship-based practice of developing intellectual skills was instead the product-oriented creation of knowledge media. One of the first dilemmas faced by interpreters in the 1980s was the replacement of first-hand interpretation methods by media and technology, losing the dialogic foundation that defined the field. Exhibits, brochures, audiovisual media, and other technological means of communicating become known as “interpretation.” This type of interpretation is simpler to create, monitor, and sell as products, and its consumption can be evaluated quantitatively. Personal services or staffed programs are expensive to run, so site managers increasingly turned to media or to volunteer workers. But interpretation-as-media, where human, face-to-face interaction is removed, rarely connects on the visceral level needed to induce self-knowledge and behavioural change. The emphasis on mediated communication and transmissive techniques rather than face-to-face interpretation was also reinforced in bureaucratic re-organization. Several respondents pointed out that their jobs moved from an educative function into media functions such as communications officer, designer, or visitor services co-ordinator. Along with this re-organization, visitors to their heritage sites were transformed into clients or customers, a nuance of language that reflects a market orientation. This conflict between heritage institutions as sites of entertainment and consumption (with interpretation as “infotainment”) and sites for public education and collective enhancement has been addressed in museological literature (e.g., Dicks, 2000; Illeris, 2006). A strong concern that emerged from the interviews was whether interpreters should “play the game” and justify their methods using economic arguments, or whether this would affect the underlying public good. This is a question encountered by culture and arts workers trying to secure support from politicians. The use of the language of business to gain support for projects that may not support neoliberal ideologies is a game many policy and public administration workers play. But by surrendering to the language and priorities of the accountants, are potential radical pedagogical goals compromised by the system?

The public-service model of interpretation, undermined by program cuts and business-oriented objectives, has also been challenged by some within the profession. Ham, for example, supports an abandonment of the “old” way of viewing interpretation, arguing that “unprofessional” ideas of interpretation-as-provocation were based on naïve or flawed theorizing. He calls for increased research into more “sophisticated” applied-science questions such as how to achieve “resource management” goals, and the measurement of knowledge outcomes for “enhanced recreational experiences” (Ham, 2002, p. 2). Ham’s comments do not represent the thoughts expressed by most of the interpreters who responded to the study and
certainly imply a tension within the occupation that needs to be explored more fully.

**Strategies of resistance**

It is possible to consider heritage interpreters as resistant forces within a hegemonic group of institutions—museums, historic sites, and state natural areas—because of the very nature of their praxis. But neoliberal policies have introduced barriers for interpreters, questioning the public knowledge they offered, demanding a more technocratic, product-oriented outlook, and challenging their devotion to praxis. Although respondents offered small steps, discussed below, that they have taken to survive in this system, whether and how they are able to maintain radical goals for their knowledge production work remains to be studied.

A neoliberal perspective implies that governments no longer want to be or are no longer able to be agencies of welfare (Baines, 2006). Few of the interpreters questioned were willing to accept this, instead steadfastly believing in the possibility of changing the state. Said one respondent:

> It sometimes seems that whether you are a countryside ranger, interpreter, or ecologist, work has today been condensed down into an endless stream of fund-bidding, box-ticking, target-meeting, and progress-reporting. I am hoping that I’ll still be working in Interpretation when the pendulum starts to swing the other way again—as it almost inevitably will.

While they wait for the pendulum to swing away, some of these interpreters try to remain true to what they see as the public interest, and they critique, resist, and work around the constraints of the system. One employee at the Royal Palaces advocated a radical approach to his interaction with bureaucracy, noting, “The current culture of strategy groups, auditing, and project management can be very stifling, but I’ve always found pushing against these sorts of constraints very stimulating.” The interviewees all expressed a desire to resist institutional culture or actively work to make change. Some relied on continuing to offer the best interpretation they could, “trying to lead by example” and “not just being ‘good enough.’ ” Others used their sense of humour or developed thick skins to ward off the “evils” of bureaucracy. Ignoring the demands of senior managers or maintaining autonomy through isolation was another common trick. “Only last week,” said one naturalist, “I let off steam in an e-mail and got reprimanded for it. Big deal—it made me feel better. My partner commented that I wouldn’t survive in a normal office. Good job, then, that mine is not a ‘normal’ office!” The “ephemeral nature” of “live” interpretation was also stressed as a way of getting away with resistant behaviour: as a face-to-face communicator, the respondent felt that interpreters on the front line are able to say many things unheard by higher-ups.

In a group that historically has been isolated by the physical location of their offices and by their outsider status within bureaucracy, they have also sought out collective responses. Professional associations boost their confidence and help maintain creative practices. The extent to which the associations IC and AHI have been active advocates of radical ideology is a question still to be studied. But
Donna, an executive member from Interpretation Canada, a business owner, and a long-time interpreter, reflects an advocacy position:

I find it frustrating that we are highly skilled and highly qualified at what we do, yet are valued by very few. Interpreters are the first to go when budget cuts come; yet we are critical to management of parks and heritage sites. I believe that we must take time to market our skills to others and demonstrate how widely applicable our skills are. At the present time, in many circles, we are just the people who play with the children in nature or tell stories to the tourists. Our role is so much more significant than that. We, as an industry, need to teach others what we actually do and the value in it!

One of the clearest ways in which some interpreters have remained independent is by removing themselves from reliance on state or corporate support. One creative person from the U.K. has taken an artistic route, storytelling and training storytellers. Although she is an entrepreneur, she is directly involved and in control of cultural knowledge production, with “a lot of power to create my own world.” Another participant from the Canadian prairies speaks proudly of the nature centre he operates independently:

Being free of the City shackles made an unbelievable difference: we could offer services that the City wouldn’t or couldn’t . . . Without having to get everything okayed up the line, I could introduce programs and services almost at will, and quickly. As a result, over five years, attendance almost doubled, school programs increased 600%, ecological research and other projects were funded, our public exposure increased . . . virtually everything improved dramatically.

This respondent sees himself as working outside the system while manipulating both state and corporate sources of funding. The nature centre he runs operates on the strength of his individual personality, which is driven to achieve radical pedagogical goals. Both respondents see the creation of their own worlds where they hold the power as key to achieving their goals—outside the system, not within it.

At the same time that interpreters are being pushed to become market-oriented and technocratic in their function, outsiders offer an alternative perspective. These voices suggest that radical pedagogy in alternative sites should be a fundamental technique to deal with global neoliberal forces and re-assert citizenship and democracy as public values. Educators such as Henry Giroux are increasingly calling for the de-commercialization of the public sphere and the promotion of public knowledge outside the bounds of formal schooling (2004). Heron, a public historian, is adamant that those involved in heritage should not abandon their intellectual integrity to “some kind of pop-culture pabulum” (2000, p. 183). He says, “We are simply developing a new role for the ‘public intellectual’, which has traditionally included intervention into the formation of public opinion and can now take on new dimensions” (p. 183). Retaining the radical focus for the activity known as interpretation, answering education scholars’ call for alternative sites of pedagogy, would seem to be a difficult but justifiable move. As Di Leo, Jacobs and Lee indicate:
While the pedagogical sites of the past may have been dominated by blackboards, desks, and lecterns, the sites of the present and future are not. With more and more students juggling work and school, there is now a growing population of students who seldom set foot in a classroom. The use of alternative sites of pedagogy will only increase, and the nature of these sites themselves will be influential. They should not be undervalued because they are outside the main educational system. (2002, p. 7)

Seen in this light, perhaps these interpreters are justified in strengthening their dedication to their alternative sites of public knowledge because they serve as sites for the work of democracy and citizenship. As informal educators—and public intellectuals—the production of critical, self-aware citizens can be seen as a necessary societal goal, a part of the process of critique needed by democratic countries. The question, perhaps, should not be whether they should retain their radical possibility, but where it should be situated and supported in a post-welfare state democracy. There is a possibility to investigate, for example, whether third-way political systems could accommodate interpretive goals that emphasize not expert knowledge, but public intellectuals as Gramscian facilitators.

Heritage interpreters are dedicated to the task of sharing stories and debating ideas, and guiding ordinary people in their own efforts to achieve self- and community knowledge. The interpreters I spoke to were all still driven by the notion that they could make a difference to people’s lives—not teach new facts or communicate government messages, but make an impact on lives. Their contributions to public knowledge are sincere and have not been smothered by bureaucracy. The paradigm shift that came with neoliberal policies did in fact change their work to a great extent, mostly in the form of increased bureaucracy and the need to reframe their activities in an economic perspective. But by and large, especially in the accounts offered by Canadian respondents, public sites still encouraged idealistic interpretations. Whether this is because these sites promoted nationalist and social-cohesion objectives will be part of follow-up research into the radical nature of this occupation. This article has introduced the possibility that heritage interpreters should continue in their efforts to act as Gramscian intellectuals, assisting the public in their efforts to obtain personal and community knowledge. Revisiting Gramsci’s ideas can provide resources and inspiration for those interpreters who attempt to maintain heritage sites as sites of radical pedagogy and reform within capitalist societies.

References


