Narrating Past and Future: Deindustrialized Landscapes as Resources

Sherry Lee Linkon
Georgetown University

Abstract

A growing body of contemporary American literature, "deindustrialization literature," most of it by writers who grew up after major plant closings, is set in former industrial areas, such as Detroit and Youngstown. These texts focus on the lives and perspectives of those who have inherited the physical, economic, and cultural landscapes of the rust belt. For these writers and their characters, the past is always an important part of the present. The deindustrialized landscape provides not only the setting but also significant plot elements, themes, and symbols through which these writers narrate stories about young adults wrestling with their identities, affiliations, and opportunities during a period of economic decline and social change. These narratives complicate the relationship between past and present through characters' observations of and interactions in the deindustrialized landscape. With a complex, ambivalent perspective, they suggest the possibility of revival for both communities and individuals. A novel and works of creative non-fiction by Youngstown's Christopher Barzak and the short stories of Detroit's Michael Zadoorian illustrate how representations of abandoned mills and decaying commercial and residential sites can reveal the complex and persistent significance of deindustrialization, decades after closings began, while also pointing toward a future that uses the past as a resource.

While we often think of deindustrialization in historical terms, as an economic event of the 1970s and '80s, it has had a lasting, complex effect on working-class people and their communities. For the American cities that were built around large-scale manufacturing and that lost tens of thousands of jobs starting in the mid-1970s, deindustrialization has replaced industry as the defining characteristic of community identity. It is not simply that cities like Youngstown, Ohio and Detroit, Michigan continue to struggle with high rates of unemployment and crime, vacant properties and empty lots, and the challenges of redefining their identities and rebuilding their economies. Equally important, these cities have become identified as sites of failure, decay, and struggle.[1] What was once the Motor City is now widely known as the most depopulated, bleak landscape in the United States. Steeltown, USA has, in recent years, become famous for accepting its decline and adopting new policies that aim to accommodate shrinkage.[2]

In these communities, and more broadly, the deindustrialized landscape has become an iconic image, one that speaks both to the history of industrial work and its loss and to the ways economic change is interpreted in the present and imagined for the future. The representations of decaying urban

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spaces that have become popular in both fine art and popular culture in recent years draw our attention to two historical eras: the period when industrial labor and community activities gave life to these cities and the period of decline as jobs disappeared, buildings crumbled, and communities struggled to survive amidst economic shrinkage. Some of these representations, such as the many websites, books, and museum exhibits featuring photographs of abandoned factories and other structures, seem to invite us to view the decay of deindustrialization as a spectacle, to find beauty in destruction. As Tim Strangleman notes in this issue, a number of scholars have criticized this trope, warning us that "smokestack nostalgia" or "ruin porn" draws on romanticized ideas that skim over the hardships of industrial work and the role of capitalist exploitation in both the building and the destruction of industry.[3] Such a perspective is only possible because the viewer of the image, and often the photographer, is not personally involved in the history being represented. S/he can view the scene of destruction with emotional distance, focusing on "beauty" rather than experience. Deindustrialized landscapes can thus allow a voyeuristic perspective that may at once erase history by aestheticizing industrial structures, rendering the people who labored in them invisible, and construct places like Youngstown and Detroit solely in terms of their past—both the past of industrial production and the past of deindustrial decline.

While many outsiders have created representations of deindustrialized sites, some of the artists and writers whose work engages deindustrialization occupy a middle space. They do not have their own memories of either industrial work or widespread job loss, but they were born and raised during the decades after major closings, and their families and communities experienced both industrial labor and the displacement and disorientation of deindustrialization.[4] Their parents or grandparents may have worked in the abandoned mills and plants that they grew up with, but their own memories involve navigating economically-challenged, crumbling physical and social landscapes. If we are to understand the long-term legacy of deindustrialization, what we might think of as the half-life of deindustrialization, we must take their representations seriously, not for what they show us about the past but for what they reveal about what the past means in the present.

As artistic representations, these texts make no pretense of being either objective or documentary in their intent. While some forms of representation seem focused on revealing the effects of deindustrialization, others emphasize the continuing, often contested meaning of that history in the present. This may be especially true of deindustrialization literature, imaginative texts that explore the interactions of early twenty-first-century characters with both the memory of industrial work and, more often, the decaying landscapes and experiences of struggle left behind by deindustrialization. While a number of worker-writers produced poetry, essays, and fiction in the years immediately after their factories or mines were closed, these works created in the midst of the closing process often focus on documenting the work being lost. For example, most of the stories in Detroit writer and autoworker Lolita Hernandez's collection,

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Autopsy of an Engine, and Other Stories from the Cadillac Plant, are set in the still-functioning plant. Such writing matters, but it is more about industrial work than about the legacy of deindustrialization. Since the early 2000s, American writers have used a variety of genres—novels, short stories, poetry, and creative nonfiction—to examine the lives and perspectives of younger adults, people who were children when the plants, mines, and mills of their communities closed. The genre is thus defined temporally—produced after 2000—and thematically—emphasizing its focus on the half-life of deindustrialization rather than the immediate experience. Most deindustrialization literature is set in the "rust belt," not only in iconic industrial cities such as Detroit but also in smaller industrial communities, such as the coal and steel towns of western Pennsylvania. Many of these writers use the deindustrialized landscape not merely as a setting but as a symbol or narrative element in their work, constructing stories that are about memory, place, and how the complex relationship between past and present shapes characters' perspectives and choices. In part because imaginative narratives tell stories, and in part because their intent is not to analyze or document but to interpret people's experiences, these texts reveal the contemporary meanings, what we might think of as the psychological and emotional landscapes, associated with deindustrialized spaces.

Instead, or perhaps in addition to, evoking the kind of "smokestack nostalgia" that Strangleman analyzes, some contemporary representations use deindustrialized landscapes to construct the imagined past as a resource for the present. We see this, for example, in Chrysler's "Imported from Detroit" ads, featuring white male performers known for their tough personas (Eminem and Clint Eastwood) offering a narrative that casts Detroit's tough past as the basis for its industrial rebirth against a video montage that intersperses images of the deindustrialized landscape with images of renovated historical sites.[5] These ads reference the determination and grit of the working-class people who once built cars and who continue to scrape by despite the hard times. While they exploit the city's struggles for commercial purposes, they also point to an emerging variation on "smokestack nostalgia," one in which images of deindustrialization serve not only as representations of the past but also as a resource for imagining the future. These images do not simply lament the loss of good but hard work, strong communities, and economic struggles; they also suggest the value of the city's persistence, survival, and hope. While Chrysler uses this narrative to sell cars, its use of deindustrial landscapes to say something about the future is not unique.[6] By juxtaposing images that reflect the memory of industrial work with images of decay and images of renovation and growth, these uses of deindustrialized landscapes represent the era of decline as part of the past while highlighting how, in the present, people are pursuing new, often creative ways of making a living and making a home in these communities. Such representations don't erase the struggles of deindustrialization, nor do they suggest that everything is now perfectly fine. Rather, they suggest a shift from viewing deindustrialized places solely through the

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lens of decline and base some of their optimism on strategies that link the past with the future. Such representations reject the call made by some to "forget the past."[7] The potential for future growth, they suggest, is based on remembering the strengths of the past.

This tentative, complex reconciliation between past and future is a theme in deindustrialization literature. For these writers and their characters, the past is always present, shaping the physical and emotional landscape of today. The deindustrialized landscape provides not only the setting but also significant plot elements, themes, and symbols through which these writers narrate stories about young adults wrestling with their identities, affiliations, and opportunities during a period of economic decline and social change. These narratives complicate the relationship between the past and the present, often through their characters' observations of and interactions in the deindustrialized landscape. As in the Chrysler ads, but with more ambivalence and complexity, these writers reveal the possibility of some kind of revival for both communities and individuals. Two works by Youngstown's Christopher Barzak, a novel and a collection of creative nonfiction pieces, and the short stories of Detroit's Michael Zadoorian illustrate how representations of abandoned mills and decaying commercial and residential sites can reveal the complex and persistent significance of deindustrialization, decades after closings began, while also pointing toward a future that uses the past as a resource.

Most of Barzak's 2007 young adult fantasy novel, *One for Sorrow,* is set in an unnamed rural community about an hour north of Youngstown.[8] Barzak's adolescent working-class narrator and protagonist, Adam McCormick, spends most of the book in the woods near his home. The story centers on his relationship with a high school friend, Jamie Marks, who is murdered near the beginning of the novel but who returns as a ghostly body, slowly fading away. Jamie draws Adam into a strange symbiotic relationship in which the living boy allows the dead one to hold on to life for as long as possible by sharing his memories, his physical warmth and affection and ultimately, as Jamie begins to forget language, his words. In the process, Adam is drawn towards death. In a long section of the book, as Jamie is struggling to resist dying and Adam is being pulled towards it, Jamie brings Adam to Youngstown, a place Adam has been only once before but that he's heard about from his grandfather, who once worked in the steel mills there. Barzak uses images of the deindustrialized landscape to cast Youngstown as a liminal way station between life and death for the two boys. As Jamie and Adam emerge from what Barzak calls "dead space," a region outside of the physical reality of everyday life, they see the Mahoning River valley, itself a kind of dead space:

> The valley itself was a wasteland. Vacant factories with smashed-up windows. Black scars on the ground where steel mills had been demolished by their owners years ago. Yellow-brown weeds and thorny bushes. Leftover machine parts. Rotting car frames and engines. Rusty metal workings . . . .[9]

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Significantly, the past that Barzak uses here is not the idealized image of a thriving, busy city that is evoked in some texts that look back with longing to the industrial era. Rather, the scene focuses almost entirely on the evidence of deindustrialization, which is itself now part of the past, depicting the presence of weeds and bushes that have grown up around the vacant factories and the rust on the abandoned car frames, engines, and parts. The industrial past is present, however, in the ghosts of former workers, who "wandered the rubble of the mills, leaving no footprints as they went. … Most were men wearing grease-stained jumpsuits; others were young women wearing long tweed skirts, carrying folders pressed to their chests."[10] The clothing evokes the heyday of the steel industry in the 1950s, rather than the time when the mills closed. The ghosts thus represent an idealized memory of steelwork, an iconic image from an era of prosperity and growth, in contrast with the physical setting in which they appear, which reflects the ravages of more than thirty years of decay after deindustrialization.

Barzak emphasizes the continuing presence and connection of the ghostly workers by showing how they respond to a whistle signaling a shift change: "they poured from the abandoned factories, and others materialized to take their places … even though it was clear that what they wanted didn't want them."[11] The scene captures the scale of the industry, which once employed thousands of workers, and its importance to the people who once worked there, presenting steelwork in an almost romantic way. Yet the image resists and critiques nostalgia. While it refers to the way of life and the sense of purpose the workers lost when the mills closed, it also suggests the community's attachment to an idealized, out-of-reach era of prosperity and its unwillingness to let go of that vision. The juxtaposition of the ghost workers against the long-empty remains of their workplace suggests that "the past" is not a matter of historical fact. Community memory, embodied in these displaced ghost workers, is a selective narrative, one that is at once attentive to the significance of lost work and attached to an idealized version of history.

For the two boys, the decay of the local landscape, not only on the mill site but around town, is attractive and symbolic. Like the dead who wander the mill, the boys spend much of their time wandering through a "world of cracked concrete … where the trees lining the streets rotted and buildings disappeared every day."[12] What he sees seems to pull Adam closer to death. He loses weight, he can't sleep, and he no longer feels hunger or cold. He becomes ghostlike, even though he is alive. As he walks, he remembers what his grandmother used to say about his steelworker grandfather: "The mills broke his back when they were open, and when they closed they broke his spirit."[13] That memory helps him feel connected to Youngstown, but he focuses on evidence of the city's decline, evidence that, like his grandfather, the city has had its back broken by deindustrialization. His initial impressions emphasize what have become standard images of the abandoned, crumbling landscape. In that setting, Jamie "feels stronger," but Adam feels less and less connected with his own life, even as he recalls details about his grandparents. The past is

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available to him, but the present doesn't offer a reason to cling to life, at least not initially. He feels alone, uncared for, drawn to death because life offers so little.

After describing and engaging his characters with the deindustrialized landscape, Barzak introduces other characters who are constructing new opportunities using the remnants of the past. During their stay in Youngstown, Adam and Jamie hide out in an old church, which at first seems abandoned, yet another symbol of the city's decline. As they begin to explore the building, Adam notes the stripped floorboards and smoke-stained walls, and he thinks that "there were no signs of life anywhere at all," apparently ignoring the sawhorses in the chapel, a tool-strewn worktable in the basement, and carpenters' lights hanging from the rafters, all evidence of the renovation efforts.[14] With his focus on death, Adam describes these objects but cannot see them as "signs of life." This is highlighted when the members of the congregation show up to work on repairs to the crumbling old building, under the supervision of the minister. Adam notices how the minister sees only the building's potential, not its injuries: "You could tell that he didn't even see the fire stains, that the broken stained glass window and empty bell tower didn't register with him . . . he saw nothing but crowds of believers filling his church with their voices."[15] The contrast between these visions highlights the problematic relationship between past and future. For some, like Adam, the past is entirely a matter of loss and decay, while others, like the minister, can only envision an idealized future.

Adam's story suggests a more moderate possibility: using the past to create a different but far from perfect future, one built not on industry but on community, a move that requires letting go of the fascination with what has been lost and focusing instead on what remains. This is what enables Adam to begin to return to life when Jamie finally "crosses over" into complete death. Very weak, tired, and sick at this point, in part because he has not been eating, Adam collapses in the church, and he is tended to by Tia, the minister's daughter. She brings him food and medicine, and she speaks to him kindly, assuring him that "God believes in you."[16] She even persuades him to attend a Sunday church service. While Adam is skeptical about the idea of God (and the novel clearly does not suggest that religion is the answer), Tia's kindness, together with food, medicine, and rest, helps him begin to heal. On the one hand, she acts as an individual caregiver but, at the same time, she is closely tied to the efforts of her father and his congregants to renovate the church, an action that rejects the notion that the decay of the past represents an inevitable decline for the community.

Within a few days, Adam's sense of where he is headed has changed. He no longer believes that he is dying: "I had to give up that wish because in the end I didn't really want it. I wasn't sure what I was on my way to now, but it wasn't dying."[17] As he recovers, Adam visits a used bookstore not far from the church, in a neighborhood where homeless men wander the streets and "the air fused with diesel and grit."[18] The bookstore "smelled like tea and cinnamon," and Adam realizes that he is "getting my senses back."[19] Like Tia, the bookstore's owner, Kurt, reaches out to Adam, giving him tea and asking about his

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situation but also sharing his own experiences. Without prying into Adam's life, Kurt assures him that things will get better, and he both acknowledges Adam's problems and tries to offer advice. Even though Adam cuts off Kurt's effort to connect with him, it's clear that he appreciates the older man's kindness, and the two relationships help him feel emotionally strong enough to return to his home, his family, and his own life.

While it is the care and connection they offer that most affects Adam, Tia and Kurt represent more than just human kindness. Both are directly engaged with constructing a future built on the remains of the past: renovating the church and running a business that finds value in things that have been abandoned. Further, both offer examples of building new opportunities that emphasize human rather than economic growth. Repairing a church will provide a place for worship and community-building, not making money, and Kurt explains that he started the bookstore to feed his soul, not for financial gain. By offering an alternative vision of Youngstown and of how to construct a satisfying life, they start Adam toward recovery. While they are rooted in the city, their examples and attention encourage Adam to return to his small town home. The deindustrialized city has served its purpose by revealing both the potential attraction of decay and death and the opportunities for modest, human renewal that persist despite the city's decline. The past provides physical and social resources that feed small, local efforts for renewal, efforts that respect the past and provide opportunities for connection and creativity but that make only small promises.

Barzak further explores this connection between past and present in Youngstown in a collection of creative nonfiction pieces, *Map for a Forgotten Valley*.[20] Among the most evocative images of this relationship appears in "The B&O, Crossroads of Time and Space." Barzak imagines a "perforation" that allows someone in the present to glimpse the scene Henry Miller saw from the Youngstown train station in 1940 of "two girls, heads wrapped in scarves, picking their way down the hill." He describes the smoky, soot-dusted immigrant neighborhood where they live, where "turkeys and chickens peck at the ground of back yards" and "mothers stand on square front lawns, wringing their hands in their aprons, waving to the girls as they approach." Even more significant than this tiny window on the past is the view of the future that Barzak imagines from the point of view of the mothers, a view that explicitly and imaginatively connects past and present. The girls, he tells us, "are their mother's dreams, they are knots in a rope to the future," which they climb, "hand over hand, like sturdy athletes, until they see a man from the future looking through Henry Miller's spy-hole, and then the empty hillside behind him, the abandoned tracks of the B&O." In this image, Barzak challenges nostalgic views of the past that might cast the girls' lives in 1940 as ideal. In the eyes of their mothers, that world was just a starting place, and their vision of an always better future turned out to be a fantasy. In this way, Barzak also challenges the progressive narrative in which the future is always better than the present. As the glimpse of a deindustrialized future makes clear, what lies

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ahead may not be what we desire. In addition, the image of the mothers looking along a rope to the future reminds us that people's lives are shaped by forces much larger than themselves, their families, or their neighborhoods, as Barzak suggests by framing the piece through a description of the site by Henry Miller. The connection and tension between past and future are made concrete in the final lines of the piece: "My back is to the future, the wind blowing my hair forward in waves toward the past. I dare not look over my shoulder." [21]

Like some of the photography books and exhibits that Strangleman examines, Barzak provides clear, often beautiful descriptions of abandoned properties in this collection, especially what he calls "the feral houses of Youngstown." However, his work draws our attention not only to the people who lived and worked in those spaces but also to their historical context, to the economic changes that led to their decline, and to the more recent changes, including signs of rebirth, in the landscape. Barzak makes workers and conflicts related to work, among workers and between workers and management, visible in this collection. In "We Work Them Out," he describes old photos of steelworkers standing "with sledgehammers over their shoulders, as if ready for battle." While the image seems to idealize the workers of the past, Barzak asks readers to recognize both their determination and their mistakes. He points out that, "They fight their brothers because their skins are different," rather than uniting to fight those who were exploiting them all. Meanwhile, the mill owners brag about how "we work them out . . . and then get in a new batch."[22] Ultimately, Barzak reminds us, the companies treated Youngstown the same way, pursuing a "new batch" of places in Central America and Asia, and the displaced workers either left or became stuck. They remain forever, sitting at their kitchen tables, but "their portraits fade a little more each year, no matter how I try to keep them."[23] Even when these pieces focus entirely on the past, Barzak highlights the tensions of the past, not an idealized image, and suggests the continuing significance of memory.

Perhaps the most romantic vision in the collection appears when Barzak turns his attention to abandoned homes and calls on readers to recognize the beauty in decay, beauty that is rooted in memory. He describes "the Feral Houses of Youngstown," long abandoned, with broken windows and stolen aluminum siding "leaving silver insulation wrap to flicker in the sunlight."[24] He invites us to pay attention to the memories these houses contain, the families that once lived there, the life represented by an old piano with useless wires coiling out of the lid. He highlights the connection between loss and memory: "In their disintegration these abandoned houses have been found: we measure love by its absence. We see what we have by what we have lost."[25] In framing his description of feral houses in this way, Barzak presents the significance of memory without directly evoking an image of the past. He invites us to think about "what we have lost" without suggesting that we can or should return to the way things were. Indeed, he spends almost no time describing the way things once were. The point is not to compare an imagined perfect past with an ugly or hopeless present. He writes that he has "learned how to find decay

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and disintegration, the coming apart of what was once composed, a beautiful process, a return rather than a disappearance."[26] Decay, he suggests, can be a resource for coming to terms with loss, and we should appreciate what it reveals.

Memory of what this place once was, of the people who lived and worked here, resonates throughout *Map of a Forgotten Valley*, but the collection is not just about remembering the past, nor even about documenting the decay of the present. Even as Barzak describes Youngstown as "an emptied-out place, a hollowed place," he suggests the possibility that the city is "becoming itself" as "we walk away from everything we've been and everything we've been told we are, or will be, or should be."[27] In the context of the collection as a whole, however, it's clear that Barzak does not mean that the city can or should forget its past. Rather, he seems to suggest that members of the community can, like Tia and Kurt in his novel, find beauty and potential in the deindustrialized landscape. Barzak thus seems to be addressing those who deplore the condition of the deindustrialized landscape, even as he acknowledges the grim conditions within the city. He describes the community's gestures toward creative renewal:

> What used to be a city is disappearing, and in its place are backyards with vegetable gardens, and down the street a new farmer's market, and across the way, a ragtag community theater is going to do Shakespeare in the park, even if the park has been abandoned by the city, and there are women now, three or sometimes four of them, who stand on corners singing spirituals, and a group of African American teenage boys, who tap dance down the main street of downtown, where no bowling ball will ever touch them.[28]

Barzak's reading of this more hopeful landscape, much like his use in the novel of characters who are involved in revitalizing Youngstown by valuing what has been abandoned, highlights the difference between depopulated images of deindustrialized places and those that feature not just the shadows of earlier inhabitants but also the living presence of those who are here now. He also implicitly rejects models of economic development that focus solely on attracting new business to the area or that celebrate the renewal of the business district while ignoring conditions in the neighborhoods—narratives of renewal that have had significant play in Youngstown over the past decade.[29] In both the novel and the creative nonfiction, Barzak shows how the past shapes the present in ways that highlight both loss and possibility, and he finds hope in the creative new efforts by the city's working class to design its own future within the city's ruins.

Detroit writer Michael Zadoorian offers a more skeptical vision of how the past and the present connect. In his 2009 collection *The Lost Tiki Palaces of Detroit*, the city's landscape, famously marked by a few exquisitely restored landmarks standing amidst the empty lots and decaying buildings that photographer Lowell Boileau has dubbed "the fabulous ruins of Detroit,"[30] provides the structure for the title story and for the book as a whole, which is divided into

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sections referencing parts of the city. For Zadoorian and his characters, the era of prosperity and productivity is out of reach; instead of focusing on the industrial past, as Barzak does, Zadoorian presents the remembered city more as a site for play, both in its heyday and in the present, three decades into the city's decline. Equally important, while Barzak, like most rust belt writers, ties the decaying landscape to the loss of industry, Zadoorian emphasizes the role of racial conflict in urban decline. Neither Zadoorian nor his characters connect the race riots of 1967 to the auto industry's move to suburban plants starting in the 1950s but, as Thomas Sugrue has shown, the economic losses of that process of urban deindustrialization was a primary cause of the 1967 riots.[31]

That history also explains why many of Zadoorian's young white characters view the city's history as less about work than about entertainment. They comment more on abandoned movie theaters and nightclubs than on empty factories, and several use the deindustrialized landscape as their own playground, defacing or breaking into empty buildings for their own entertainment. They are fascinated with the decaying city, though they approach its history with varying degrees of understanding and complexity. Through their eyes, Zadoorian challenges us to consider not only the significance of urban decay but also the problems inherent in clinging to a naïve and idealized vision of the past. For him, the past is both a tool for defining oneself and a potential trap, even as its legacy persists.

In the title story, the narrator rides a bus along Woodward Avenue, the primary artery through Detroit that is also, according to the Woodward Avenue Action Association, "the birthplace of the automobile industry, incredible music, world-class attractions and the sites of countless events."[32] On his way to an unidentified job, he passes and comments on the histories of three long-abandoned Polynesian-style restaurants "nestled among the cathedrals of twentieth-century V-8 Hydraulic Commerce."[33] He describes how the first "tiki palace" was built at a moment of economic expectation in the late 1960s, "to be the largest South Seas supper club of its kind in the Midwest," with a "lavish … Lucite bar-top with 1,250 Chinese coins embedded in it and bar tables made from brass hatch covers from trading schooners … a mountainette of volcanic lava … a grotto lush with palm trees and flaming tikis." But, he notes, it opened "barely a month after the worst race riot in Detroit's history. It lasted not quite two years."[34] As the bus continues down Woodward, it passes the famously-restored Fox Theater, and the narrator notes how he "should not be able to see three blocks behind a major building to spot another, but behind the Fox, save for a fire station and an abandoned party store, there are mostly empty fields."[35] He also passes a block where loft condos are being built in old buildings across the street from "a giant new skyscraper built by a software billionaire" and a building that has been painted with polka dots as part of a public art project. Zadoorian's mini-tour of Detroit highlights the contradictions of contemporary economic development efforts there. Renovations of classic structures that represent the city's automaking history, which once

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made it one of the most prosperous in the US, contrast with new construction funded by a new, less labor-intensive industry. Both share the landscape with a project initiated by an African-American Detroit native and former autoworker, Tyree Guyton, whose work, according to his website, "has drawn attention to the plight of Detroit's forgotten neighborhoods and spurred discussion and action."[36] The description emphasizes the limitations of contemporary efforts to rebuild the city amid persistent economic struggles. A few new buildings or upscale renovations cannot erase decades of poverty and decline from the landscape, nor are such efforts disconnected from a more grassroots, alternative approach, one that, like Barzak's church renovation or farmer's market, is at least as much about emotional recovery as it is about economic opportunity.

The narrator is clearly both knowledgeable about and interested in Detroit's history, though his own relationship with the city's past is complicated. After noting the failure of several tiki palaces, he tells how, as part of a "drunken tiki frenzy" with friends one night, he pried a terra-cotta tile off the façade of Trader Vic's. That building is scheduled to be demolished soon, he tells us, "but it's been a ghost for decades." The memory of his "offense to the tiki gods" is just one of what he calls "these agonies of all our pasts," which will "soon be ground into dust in the middle of the night, the preferred time to start the demolition of historic buildings here in Detroit." While the narrator regrets the loss of these structures, he also sees the change as inevitable, a reflection of the city's racial and economic tensions. He notes how the demise of the tiki palaces was tied to the 1967 race riots and to white flight: "When the white folks disappeared from downtown Detroit at the end of the workday in the seventies, the clubs and restaurants foundered." He also notes signs of change: "New buildings push out the grand old ones, like bullies in a big rush. When you go downtown at night there are people there now, suburban people, city people, doing things, spending money."[37] In these two sentences, Zadoorian highlights the narrator's ambivalence. The new buildings are "bullies," but there's also new economic activity as people return to the city.

But Detroit's economic and racial tensions are not entirely part of the past. Interspersed with the description and backstory of the deindustrialized landscape is the narrator's experience with an African-American man on the bus. Soon after the man, whom the narrator describes as "homeless," boards the bus, he begins to say, repeatedly, "I'm invisible," a claim that gains validity as the other bus riders do their best to ignore him. Even as the narrator avoids making eye contact with the man, he reflects that the statement is "strange and existential—an awl to the heart," and he thinks that the homeless man "*understands his condition.*"[38] The moment is ironic as the narrator's interpretation of the man's behavior highlights his own education and allows him to distance himself, even as he reassures himself that he understands and is sympathetic with the homeless man's situation. As the bus continues along Woodward, the homeless man begins to focus his attention on the narrator, who is the only white person on board, announcing that there's a "motherfucker on our bus" and demands, "Why don't you go back to Livonia?"[39] While other

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riders sigh in exasperation at the man's taunts, and one woman scolds him, no one takes action until he drops his pants and waves his penis around, at which point the bus driver kicks him off. The story closes with everyone on the bus laughing together about the incident, and while that may defuse the tension on the bus, it does not erase the significance of the racial and economic tension in the story.

Throughout the story, Zadoorian juxtaposes the deindustrialized landscape and the story of its decline, including its difficult history of racial conflict, with evidence of both change and persistence. New buildings and restorations, the return of economic activity, even the white narrator's presence on the bus as he rides to work, all suggest a city that is beginning to recover, while empty lots, abandoned buildings, and the tension between the African-American homeless man and the white narrator, who seems to be on his way to a low-wage job, make clear that the city's past is still very much present. Change may well be coming, but the racial conflict and economic challenges of the city's history threaten the efforts to create a bright new future. On the other hand, as the narrator makes clear, much of the city's history deserves to be preserved. Demolition and erasure will not make the past invisible here. The past, like the homeless man on the bus and the narrator's stories about the tiki palaces and the city's racial divides, will persist no matter how many big skyscrapers replace fondly-remembered old buildings.

Zadoorian's stories also suggest the possibility of misreading and even exploiting the past. The narrator of "The World of Things," a middle-class professional in his late thirties, collects early 1960s furniture and decorative objects, from the period before the Detroit riots of 1967, the year he was born. His family stayed in their "good white middle-class Detroit neighborhood" after the riots, and he is at once puzzled and proud that his parents remained in their home, "even after it became a neighborhood of crack houses—main streets lined with the faded exoskeletons of burned-out mom-and-pop stores and boarded-up car dealerships with weeds growing between the concrete slabs where bright Chryslers once stood."[40] While he understands the significance of Detroit's history, noting that "the American dream changed in Detroit after the '67 riots,"[41] he is fixated on the period before the riots, viewing the late '50s and early '60s as an innocent era before conflict and struggle.

The story follows him as he cleans out his mother's home after she dies. He is excited to inherit her belongings, especially the items she'd kept in the basement—an old couch, old lamps—all things her son had desired for his collection. The narrator viewed these items as ideal examples of '60s style, which for him and his friends is the ultimate in cool, but his mother had always refused to even let him look in the basement. When he finally goes down the stairs after her death, he finds the unusable, rotting, mildew covered, and moth-eaten decaying remains of his family's former life. His mother has left him a note, asking whether all these things he wanted so badly are really "*everything you wanted? Is it all as amusing as you hoped?*"[42] The note seems aimed not only at the narrator but also at the reader, inviting us to rethink any nostalgia we

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may have for the heyday of industrial cities or the prosperous postwar era. The past, Zadoorian suggests here, is not something to collect or idealize, even though the present may seem dull or difficult in comparison. At the end of the story, the narrator gives away or sells his once-prized collection, preparing to create his own middle-class suburban life, complete with "a beige plaid couch, an entertainment center, wall-to-wall carpeting." His closing prediction, "we will be happy,"[43] is not entirely persuasive, however, and Zadoorian invites us to question the narrator's vision of a new future entirely detached from the past. His fascination with the past has, after all, defined this character. As the reference to the "beige-plaid couch" suggests, without that idealized version of his past, it's difficult to imagine an interesting future for him. His version may have been a fabrication, but the real history of his family, with all its rot and dust, cannot just be tossed aside. The image remains with the reader as a reminder of the problematic persistence of the past.

A similar shift from a hipster fixation on the past to embracing a modest but potentially promising future occurs in "Spelunkers," narrated by a freelance photographer who runs a website called "*The Paris of the Midwest Is Crumbling,*"[44] featuring photographs of the insides of abandoned but significant Detroit buildings, which he describes as "fucked-up shit," along with comments and stories about their history. The site is, as he describes it, "*uber*-urban, *echt*-industrial, proto-apocalyptic, rustbelt cool, or whatever the underground magazines who worship Detroit are calling us these days."[45] Like the narrator of "The World of Things," he's interested in the past because it's cool, even as he disdains the very idea that the past has become cool. He also thinks about both the original and the current uses of the buildings, seeing in both evidence of human emotions and interactions. Standing in an abandoned movie theater, he thinks, "you can tell that people laughed and cried and applauded here, smiled at each other. They threw popcorn and drank Pepsi and broke their teeth on Jujubes." He goes on, offering a comment on the building that might apply to the entire city: "It's awful that this would even happen to a building. This should never happen anywhere. But I see something like this and I want to try to find the beauty in it, make some sense of it, give it a reason, *fill* it with something."[46] Even as he feels the impulse to make the decaying landscape meaningful, if not by repurposing it then at least by making its presence visible through his website, he is confused by other people's efforts to make their presence known within the abandoned structures. He understands that the graffiti covering the walls shows that people in the present "wanted to be heard, to offer proof that they existed," but his ambivalence is revealed when he adds that he doesn't quite understand why they would come to "a deserted, broken place to do it."[47] He doesn't recognize that his own work might function in the same way, as a means of making himself visible and expressing his own perspective rather than as a way of preserving and engaging with local history.

The limitations of his engagement with the past become clear as the story unfolds. As he becomes involved with Jenna, a grad student who's studying graffiti as art, he stops visiting abandoned buildings. Like the minister's daughter

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and the bookstore owner in Barzak's *One for Sorrow*, she represents a different way of thinking about things, and he begins to rethink his life. At the end of the story, after having largely given up his spelunking habit, he goes on one last expedition, and in the closing scene, as he looks out over the city from the roof of the Fine Arts Building, which is slated to be torn down soon, his observations of the landscape clearly reflect the direction of his own life:

> Before long, I started to relax. First by focusing on the horizon, velvet black and studded with golden light; then on the darkened carcasses of the empty buildings I had explored –all that history soon to be gone. Finally, my eyes settled on the new buildings going up, their shiny exteriors, work sites mercury bright even in the nighttime, the cranes and other leviathans that move earth and girders from one place to another. I saw that the old city was going away.[48]

While his vision of a new future focuses on light and movement, images that suggest new energy, in the context of this collection, and given the much-discussed reality of Detroit's ongoing struggle to redefine itself and create new economic opportunity, it's difficult not to read this closing comment as somewhat ironic. Like the "beige-plaid couch" in "The World of Things," the image of the building sites invokes a future that may not fulfill the characters' vision. The "shiny exteriors" and "mercury bright" work sites offer an illusion of significant economic change, but the disappearance of the old city is not necessarily desirable, as several stories in the collection suggest. The narrator may be ready to focus his life more toward the future than the past, but it is the past that has made this new life possible. The deindustrialized landscape of Detroit, after all, led him into the relationship that is now drawing him away from his fascination with the past.

As in Barzak's novel and creative nonfiction pieces, the industrial past has multiple potential meanings in Zadoorian's stories. It can function as a kind of restraint, holding back a character's growth, as with the narrator of "Spelunkers," or even draw someone into depression and inertia, as it does for Adam in *One for Sorrow.* At the same time, the past can provide a resource for creating something new—fulfilling work, as in the used bookstore; the creative uses of abandoned spaces we see in *Map of a Forgotten Valley*, and new relationships, as in "Spelunkers." For Barzak and Zadoorian, the past is never simple, and their texts warn readers against investing in idealized versions of history while also making clear that it cannot be easily discarded.

Barzak and Zadoorian use images of deindustrialized landscapes that have become familiar in photography and the media, but as writers they have the advantage of imaginative narrative. Because they present these landscapes in the context of stories, using landscape as the setting rather than the focal point of the text, their narratives show how people draw upon memory—their own and those inherited from their communities—to construct complex meanings about places and their history. When they invite us to look at deindustrialized spaces, the echoes of the past and the beauty of decay are not the whole the

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story. Barzak can thus describe an old photograph or an empty lot, inviting us to recognize everything that it tells us about the past but, unlike a photographer, he also shows how characters respond to what they see. He connects multiple images, not simply by placing them side-by-side but by showing how a character or narrator moves through them. Such moves make the past dynamic and complex in ways that many of the more static visual representations cannot. Zadoorian highlights the contrast between the imagined version of the past and all of the ways that the present both changes and perpetuates the way things were. He imagines how the spelunker views an abandoned building as both a representation of history and a site for expression and exploitation. In this way, these texts offer a retort to the cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words. In a thousand words, they demonstrate, a writer can offer multiple ways of looking at the deindustrialized landscape.

By setting their stories in the deindustrialized landscapes of Youngstown and Detroit and, even more importantly, by tracing their characters' interactions with those landscapes, Barzak and Zadoorian make visible the contested and productive relationship between the past and the present. The very physical presence of the landscape, and in Detroit, especially, the way that landscape combines old and new elements, highlights the interdependency of decline and renewal. These landscapes contain more than economic loss, more than the evocative decay that makes them such appealing images to photographers and media producers, more than the memories of past lives that make them meaningful to those who remember the good old days before the mills closed. They also provide a framework for thinking about how those who have inherited these places, both individuals and communities, imagine their own lives. Through deindustrialized landscapes, writers, their characters, and their readers are challenged to consider not only how the past has influenced them and their communities, but also how the past shapes contemporary ideas about and strategies for economic change. Their work critiques idealized visions of these cities in their industrial heyday, highlighting the way those ideals ignore the problems of the past, but they also challenge visions of the future that promise a new prosperity—one that leaves most of the working class behind—through the erasure of the past. They offer, instead, a more modest vision of a future that uses the past as a resource for survival, adaptation, and the development of human connections that, they suggest, may be as valuable as economic opportunities. In other words, they offer a distinctly working-class representation of the continuing influence of deindustrialization.

Historians may be tempted to dismiss these creative texts as trivial. As a historian once told me, as far as she was concerned, literature was "dessert," something entertaining and enjoyable but not substantive. However, as another historian, David Roediger, has argued, literary texts can provide unique insight into complex historical themes.[49] As imaginative narratives of present-day characters who have inherited the memory of industrial work and deindustrialization, these texts reveal the way contemporary people—the writers as well as their characters—make sense of the past. Like all

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representations, these texts are valuable not as documentary evidence of what happened but as interpretive evidence of why what happened matters today. Especially because of the way Barzak and Zadoorian construct the past as a resource, their work asks us to engage critically and creatively with the meaning of history. The historical event of deindustrialization matters today not only because of what happened when plants closed but also because it continues to affect people and places. Those who have inherited the economic struggles and blighted landscapes of deindustrialization have the opportunity to use the complicated past and the often conflicted present for their own purposes. The best literary efforts, like the work of Barzak and Zadoorian, treat the past as a problematic resource that both shapes and highlights the contradictions of the present and the future.

NOTES

1. As John Russo and I argue in *Steeltown USA: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence, KS, 2002), after the major wave of steel mill closings in the late '70s and early '80s, we can identify several distinct phases in the representations of Youngstown, first as a site of loss, then as a site of failure, and ultimately as a site of corruption.

2. As James Rhodes and John Russo note in a forthcoming article, "Shrinking Smart? Urban Redevelopment and Shrinkage in Youngstown, Ohio"(*Urban Geography* (2013) 34(3):305–326), however, this narrative does not adequately describe what is happening in Youngstown. But the accuracy of these images is almost beside the point. Regardless of what is really happening in Detroit and Youngstown, they are defined in public discourse as sites of deindustrialization.

3. See Tim Strangleman's piece in this issue.

4. See Ch. 3 of *Steeltown,* which examines the difficulty many Youngstown residents felt in simply defining who they and their city were without steelwork.

5. Both of the ads, which ran during the Super Bowl (the most watched and most hyped television advertising event in the US each year), are available on Chrysler's YouTube channel, http://www.youtube.com/user/chrysler?feature=watch, which ads new videos regularly.

6. The Chrysler ads, together with similar marketing efforts focused on Braddock, PA, no doubt deserve their own examination, and I plan to include this in the larger project on twenty-first century representations of deindustrialization.

7. See *Steeltown*, Epilogue.

8. A film based on the novel is due out in 2014 from Hunting Lane Films.

9. Christopher Barzak, *One for Sorrow* (New York, 2007), 227.

10. Ibid, 227.

11. Ibid, 227.

12. Ibid, 236.

13. Ibid, 228.

14. Ibid, 232.

15. Ibid, 246.

16. Ibid, 276.

17. Ibid, 277.

18. Ibid, 276.

19. Ibid, 277.

20. Christopher Barzak, "Map of a Forgotten Valley," *New Haven Review* 7 (November, 2010), online.

21. Christopher Barzak, "The B&O: Crossroads of Time and Space," *Muse* 12 (January 2011), 5.

22. Barzak, "Map," 18. The line quotes Dr. William Hudnut, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. The story of Hudnut's visit to the mill is told on a Mahoning Valley

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Historical Society webpage, http://www.mahoninghistory.org/wdyk27-millwork.htm, and is depicted in a poster created by the Bread and Roses project of SEIU/1199, as part of the union's series on labor and art.

23. Ibid, 18.
24. Ibid, 22.
25. Ibid, 21.
26. Ibid, 22.
27. Ibid, 13, 15.
28. Ibid, 14.
29. See Rhodes and Russo.
30. In the mid-1990s, as artists' fascination with deindustrialized landscapes was still a fairly new phenomenon, Boileau created a website called "The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit" that combined images of decaying and repurposed old buildings with narratives about their history and a very active discussion forum focused on remembering the city's past and advocating for preservation. http://www.detroityes.com/home.htm.
31. Sugrue, Thomas J., "From Motor City to Motor Metropolis: How the Automobile Industry Reshaped Urban America." *Automobile in American Life and Society*, online.
32. Woodward Avenue Action Association, http://www.woodwardavenue.org/.
33. Zadoorian, Michael, *The Lost Tiki Palaces of Detroit* (Detroit, 2009), 193.
34. Ibid, 193–194.
35. Ibid, 196.
36. *The Art of Tyree Guyton*, http://www.tyreeguyton.com.
37. Ibid, 199.
38. Ibid, 195, italics original.
39. Ibid, 197, 199.
40. Ibid, 48.
41. Ibid, 46.
42. Ibid, 56, italics original.
43. Ibid, 60.
44. Ibid, 169, italics original.
45. Ibid, 170, italics original.
46. Ibid, 179, italics original.
47. Ibid, 177.
48. Ibid, 192.
49. David Roediger, "'More Than Two Things': The State of the Art of Labor History," in *New Working-Class Studies*, eds. John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, (Ithaca, NY, 2005), 32–41.

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