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## “I Have Sometimes Seen the White Cloth Winding Over the Rollers ... and I Have Thought it Beautiful”: Reading the Mill Girls’ Narratives as Artifacts of Material Rhetoric

### Résumé

*J’analyse les récits rédigés par un groupe de femmes qu’on appelait les « Filles de l’usine » et qui travaillaient dans les usines textiles de Lowell, Massachusetts, dans les années 1840. Ces récits décrivent en détail les objets et la configuration physique des usines et leur impact sur les esprits et les corps des femmes qui y travaillaient. En me basant sur l’idée de culture matérielle, je démontre que ces récits permettent au lecteur d’en percevoir la rhétorique concrète et puissante. J’emprunte la théorie des hétérotopies de Michel Foucault pour éclairer les dimensions rhétoriques et spatiales de la culture matérielle et, avec elle, l’importance des textes portant sur l’environnement matériel pour mieux comprendre les expériences de vie de groupes marginalisés tels que celui des « Filles de l’usine ».*

### Abstract

*I analyze narratives written by a group of women, known as the “Mill Girls,” who laboured in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1840s. These narratives provide rich accounts of the material artifacts and spatial layout of the mills, and the impact of the mills on the minds and bodies of the women who worked there. I build on ideas about material culture to demonstrate how these narratives allow readers to experience these texts as more tangible and rhetorically powerful. Borrowing from Michel Foucault’s theory of heterotopias, I aim to illuminate the spatial and rhetorical dimensions of material culture, and with it, the importance of material texts for understanding with greater clarity the lived experiences of marginalized groups like the Mill Girls.*

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During the early 1800s, the spread of industrialization resulted in the growth of New England’s textile industry and, subsequently, the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts (Josephson 1949: 204–205). By 1840, 32 mills existed along Lowell’s rivers and canal systems, along with boarding houses that were home to 8,000 mill workers (Dublin 1975: 1). These mill workers, collectively known as the “Mill Girls,”<sup>1</sup> were typically young women who had grown up in the farming communities of rural Massachusetts. Enticed by relatively high wages, safe room and board and educational opportunities, the young women viewed mill work as an opportunity to travel, experience life in an urban setting, and

earn additional income for their families. The mill owners not only wanted to persuade these women and their families that the mill environment was safe and pleasant but also wished to perpetuate the idea that economic prosperity and a thriving natural landscape were not mutually exclusive concepts (Stanton 2006: 48). The mill landscapes, then, often consisted of aesthetically pleasing tree-lined parks and walking paths along Lowell’s extensive system of canals (48).

Lowell’s mills grew in proportion with the expansion of New England’s textile industry, and the experiences of the Mill Girls reflected this trend. An increase in the production of textiles brought with it competition among nearby mills,

which then resulted in overproduction and drove down the price of finished cloth. Profits eventually declined, which subsequently led to a decline in working conditions for the mill operatives: reduced wages, longer hours and higher expectations of productivity (Dublin 1975: 2). The Mill Girls protested these changes; between 1834 and 1836 they went on strike, and, from 1843 to 1848, they started a campaign to reduce the number of hours in the workday (2). The best known campaign, the Ten Hour Movement, was most active in 1845 and was aimed at reducing the workday from fourteen to ten hours per day.

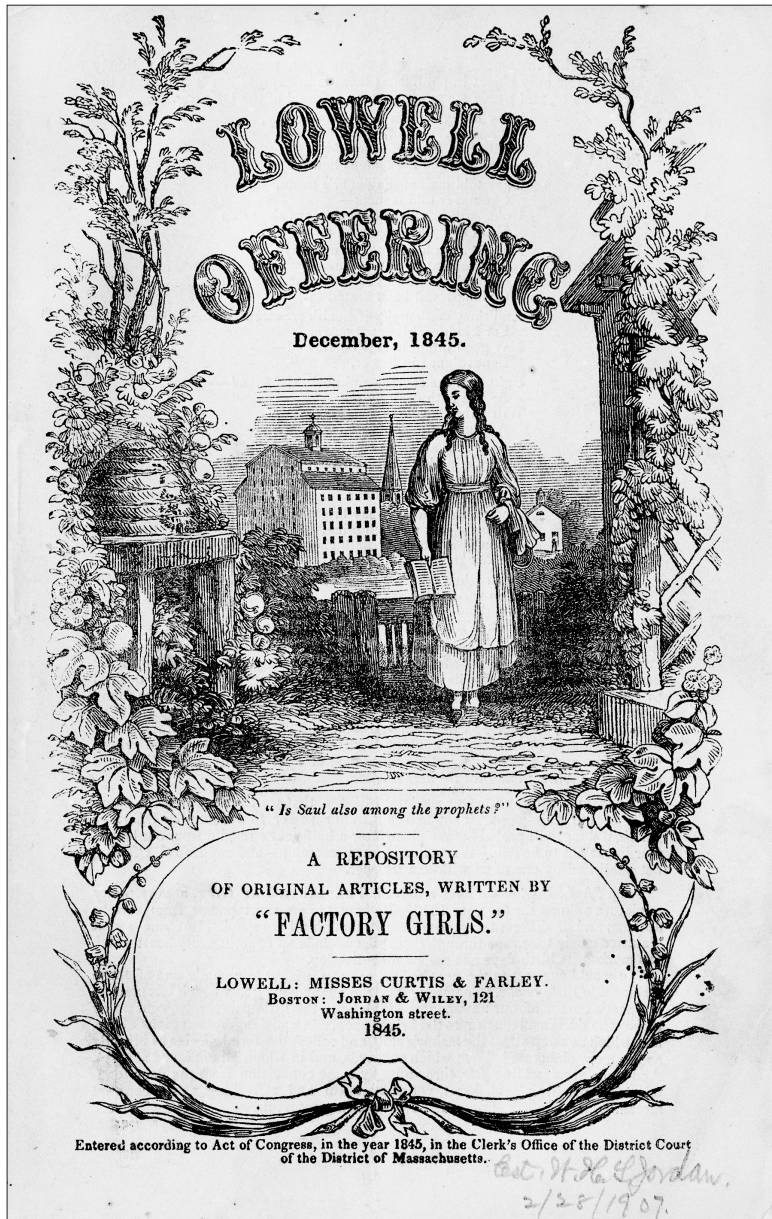
From 1840 to 1845, the Mill Girls also published a literary magazine called the *Lowell Offering*. The *Lowell Offering* was published, totalling five volumes. It was managed by the mill owners and the local clergy and was written by the mill operatives. The publication was ostensibly intended to allow mill workers a forum for discussing mill life, and writing poetry and short stories, often about mill life, which would provide an outlet for their creative and cultural expression. A close reading of work published in the *Lowell Offering*, however, reveals the female labourers' occasional dissatisfaction with their working conditions and environment; nonetheless, these pieces typically conclude with idyllic visions of life in the mills. That is, the narratives often shift from romanticizing life in the mills to reflecting wistfully on the difficult nature of the work to rationalizing or justifying the Mill Girls' struggles. Thus, contributions in the *Lowell Offering* often contain mixed messages about mill life. Moreover, many of the narratives contain rich descriptions of the physical spaces of the mills and the artifacts within those spaces. Of particular interest to this article is the manner in which the Mill Girls, through their narratives, describe the material impacts of the mills and boarding houses on their minds and bodies.

In this article, then, I highlight these narratives' focus on the material culture of the mills, and how that focus serves to communicate the impacts of mill life on the mind and body during the period of labour reform in early New England. Ultimately, I aim to show how a focus on the material dimensions of the text can make our experience of those texts more visceral and tangible, thus showing the significance of narra-

tive for material culture studies. I borrow from Nadine Pence Frantz's definition of material culture, which she describes as designating "the physical, material objects that cultures create and use in the course of common life" (1998: 791). She refers to objects including "chairs, tools, and other artifacts of daily life as well as those that have traditionally been held as evidence of 'high' culture such as music, visual and plastic arts, architecture, drama, dance, and writing" (791). I understand the term "rhetorical analysis" to refer to the study of text and discourse in order to achieve "a greater understanding of human action" (Segal 2005: 2). In addition, I understand "text" not only in the more traditional sense of "printed words on the page" but also as multimodal—as potentially invoking visual, material or spatial elements. Likewise, as Pence Frantz points out, fields like textual studies and, I would add, rhetoric and composition, are becoming ever more mindful of the materiality of the text, "recognizing that writing is itself not a transparent medium of language which needs materiality only at its place of application or illustration, but that writing's very materiality influences the range of interpretive responses and receptions to the text" (1998: 791-92). Likewise, I argue here that to understand the Mill Girls' narratives as reflecting the material culture of the mills can expand the range of our "interpretive response" by allowing us to engage with greater empathy in the lives of the women who laboured at the Lowell Mills.

## Data Collection and Organization

The *Lowell Offering* narratives I analyze in this article have been anthologized in a clear and well-organized secondary source by historian Benita Eisler (1998). Helpful to my own research was Eisler's thematic categorization of narratives; she includes one section, for example, focused on writings about the mills and boarding houses specifically. Because this article focuses on the impact of the physical mills and boarding houses on the body, I analyze narratives that focus predominantly on the Mill Girls' discussions of the material culture of the mills. In my own archival research and in my reading of secondary sources, I found the following themes about the material culture of the mills and boarding



**Fig. 1**  
Cover of the Lowell Offering, December 1845 issue. (*American Textile History Museum.*)

houses to be prevalent: the exterior architecture of the mill buildings; the interior spaces such as dining rooms, boarding houses and work rooms; material artifacts within these spaces, including furniture, looms, and plants and flowers; and the impact of these artifacts and spaces on the minds and bodies of the Mill Girls, including references to noise levels, cleanliness, air quality and crowding. While I quote directly from the narratives in Eisler's collection throughout this article, I have also located these narratives in the primary sources available through online archives and holdings at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell Library, and I have checked quotations

against the originals for consistency. I analyze the following pieces:

- “A Second Peep at Factory Life” (1845, series 5);
- “Letters from Susan: 1-4” (1844, series 4);
- “Pleasures of Factory Life” (1840, series 1);
- “Editorial: Plants and Flowers in the Mills” (1840, series 1);
- “Editorial: Home in a Boarding-House” (1842, series 3);
- “A Week in the Mill” (1845, series 5);
- “The Affections Illustrated in Factory Life” (1843, series 4); and
- “Leisure Hours of the Mill Girls” (1842, series 2).

My analysis of the Mill Girls' narratives stems from a larger project about the Lowell Mills, which involved a study of the contemporary site of the mills: the Lowell Mills National Historical Park (Propen 2012). The research and analysis of the Mill Girls' narratives is unique to this article.

### Context about the Lowell Offering and Goals of the Publication

The *Lowell Offering* (see Fig. 1) was published 1840-1845, in a total of five volumes, amid wage cuts, protests over long workdays and deteriorating conditions at the mills.<sup>2</sup> Overseen by the mill owners and the clergymen of Lowell, the *Offering* was written by the mill operatives and, from 1842 to 1845, was published under the editorship of Harriet Farley,<sup>3</sup> who was a mill worker and frequent contributor to the magazine (Foner 1977: 19). By 1841, the *Lowell Offering* was seeking monthly subscriptions and was selling for “six and one quarter cents an issue” (Eisler 1998: 33). There is no clear evidence that the Mill Girls received monetary compensation or other benefits for submitting their work, apart from the intellectual fulfillment that was understood to accompany writing and publication.

With publication of the *Offering*, the editors apparently sought to demonstrate that the mill workers had access to education and means of self-improvement, perhaps in an effort to appeal to the sensibilities of the families whose daughters would come to work there. In the first issue of the *Offering*, for example, the editors state that the publication is meant to help cultivate talent,

archive the most worthy material, and showcase the intelligence of the mill workers:

The Lowell Offering is strictly what it purports to be, “a Repository of original articles on various subjects, written by Factory Operatives.” The objects of the publication are; to encourage the cultivation of talent; to preserve such articles as are deemed the most worthy of preservation; and to correct an erroneous idea which generally prevails in relation to the intelligence of persons employed in the Mills. (Thomas 1840: 16)

As historians of Lowell also describe and critique, the mill owners may have had a subtle political agenda with the *Offering*, as they sought to demonstrate, through the publication, that mill life was not degrading and that the mill workers were not exploited:

The young women in the Lowell mills formed “improvement circles”—little clubs in which they produced sketches, essays, and short tales modeled on those they found in the popular periodicals of the day. The circles were fostered and encouraged by the clergymen of Lowell and by the mill owners, *who looked with favor upon their employees devoting themselves to culture rather than to complaining about their conditions in the mills and acting together to remedy them.... The major emphasis in these issues was to dispel the notion that factory work was degrading and that the mill operatives were exploited.* (Foner 1977: 26; emphasis added)

While some of the narratives, short stories and poetry published in the *Lowell Offering* revealed the operatives’ dissatisfaction with their working conditions, they generally conclude with “the same escapism that characterized the main bulk of the contributions” (26). Moreover, as Eisler describes, the mill owners in charge of the *Lowell Offering* initially laid out an editorial policy regarding any discussion of working conditions in the mills within the pages of the *Offering*: “with wages, board etc. we have nothing to do” (1998: 36). As we will see, however, the Mill Girls did manage to circumvent this policy through what I will argue are subtle rhetorical manoeuvres on their part.

Nonetheless, inferences of the *Offering*’s subtle political agenda, in its attempt to paint a favourable portrait of mill life, and through its attempts at neutrality, eventually raised speculations of whether submissions were at all censored or edited. We may wonder, for example, given

the editors’ description of the publication, what counted as articles deemed “the most worthy of preservation” (Thomas 1840: 16). Additionally, according to Eisler, evidence suggests that Harriet Farley’s family may have “received occasional, if discreet, assistance from one of the mill owners, Abbot Lawrence” (1998: 38). We might speculate, then, that this assistance influenced decisions about what to publish or reject in the *Offering*.

As historical archives also reveal, some of the Mill Girls either wrote anonymously or published under pseudonyms or pen names. According to records at the Center for Lowell History, for example, Harriet Farley authored the narratives written by “Adelia” and “Susan” in the “Letters from Susan” series analyzed in this article. Publishing under a pseudonym was allowed by the editors of the *Offering*, as long as the writer’s real name accompanied the initial submission—in fact, a publication policy regarding anonymity of authorship was in place:

The real name and residence of the writer must accompany the article furnished, in every case, as a guaranty that it is original.... A fictitious signature may be chosen by any writer, or the real name or initials of the name, will be affixed in print. (Thomas 1840: 16)<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, the editors did not conceal the fact that they sought to avoid discussions of politics and religion in the publication, as is clearly described in the first issue of the *Offering*: “The editors solicit communications from female operatives, for the succeeding numbers of the Offering, 1st. *Communications of a sectarian character, in either religion or politics, are inadmissible.*” (Thomas 1840: 16; emphasis added). Moreover, the first issue of the *Offering* describes the following policy about the editing or censoring of accepted submissions:

The critical reader will doubtless discover, in many of the articles making this number of the Offering, words and phrases for which better might be substituted; and also sentences that want the freedom and smoothness of perfect composition. In explanation, the editors have to say, that, in preparing the articles for the press, while they claimed to exercise the rights usually granted to the editorial fraternity, they resolved carefully to avoid any alteration which might affect the sentiment or style of the several writers.... They are quite sure the rule adopted will be approved by all who shall look

to the articles of the *Offering*, as evidence of the intellectual and literary power of the writers. (Thomas 1840: 16)

According to the publication, of the submissions that were accepted, the editors did not alter them, or altered them only in minor ways. At the same time, the editors sought to remain neutral and avoid overtly political submissions in the first place. While we do not know the extent to which these policies were enforced, we can see that the Mill Girls did manage to incorporate subtly political statements about the quality of their work environment and deteriorating working conditions.

The editors' goal of neutrality drew some criticism. For example, Sarah Bagley, a mill worker and head of the Ten Hour Movement, accused Farley of "rejecting several articles she had submitted, as being 'too controversial'" (Eisler 1998: 38). As one of the main proponents of the Ten Hour Movement, Bagley was known to be a more outspoken Mill Girl and advocated striking for the ten-hour workday. She levied the

following criticism against the *Lowell Offering*: "Led on by the fatal error of neutrality, it has neglected the operative as a working being ... the very position of the *Offering* as a factory girl's magazine, precludes the possibilities of neutrality" (Eisler 1998: 40). From 1845 to 1846, just after the *Lowell Offering* stopped publication, Bagley went on to write for the labour reform paper, the *Voice of Industry*, a more explicitly political labour paper published in Fitchburg, Massachusetts (Eisler 1998: 214).<sup>5</sup> As I seek to demonstrate here, while the Mill Girls' narratives indeed tend to romanticize mill life, they clearly subvert such depictions as well. For example, the narrative "A Second Peep at Factory Life," published in 1845, describes the physical landscape of the mills in almost surreal terms; however, a critical reading that sets this narrative within the context of the *Voice of Industry's* 1845 criticism suggests that the Mill Girls indeed used the *Offering* as a rhetorical tool to critique their environment—that their narratives focused on the "real problems of these workers" (Foner 1977: 57).

**Fig. 2**  
*Boott Mills (now part of Lowell Mills National Historical Park). (Photo by author.)*



## Cultural Context, Material Rhetoric, and the Development of the Lowell Mills

Analyzing the material rhetoric of the Lowell Mills means understanding the spaces of the mills as inextricably linked to their surrounding cultural context, or their position within the larger setting of the growing textile industry in early New England and the growth of capitalism in the United States more broadly. In the view of feminist geographer Doreen Massey, “the identities of place are always unfixed, contested, and multiple”; any given place should not be viewed “by placing boundaries around it” but, rather, by considering the ways in which that place is implicated in the “mix of links and interconnections” to the places beyond it (1994: 5). Massey thus asks us to always consider the contexts and schemas that allow spaces to function both on their own and as part of a larger societal system.

To view the Lowell Mills as heterogeneous, contested spaces is compatible with Michel Foucault’s (1986) notion of heterotopia. Heterotopic spaces constitute sets of relationships, such as, in this case, the relationships between the Mill Girls and the machinery, or the relationships between the Mill Girls and the mill owners, that are always in use and in tension, and that sustain and perpetuate knowledge through the competing discourses and events enacted within them. Heterotopias are geographically diverse and culturally specific—there is no universal heterotopia, according to Foucault. They are “irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another”; however, we may still look for the “set of relations by which a given site can be defined” (1986: 23). Within the mills, as I will show, the Mill Girls often experience what they feel are the rewards of mill life, as well as the physical and psychological struggles that come with it. They experience conflicting feelings and emotions as a result of their interactions with these spaces. We see reflected in the Mill Girls’ narratives various, sometimes contradictory, accounts of mill life. Sites like the mills have common but multiple uses, and are inhabited by various bodies, such as mill workers and managers, with various sets of goals.

Foucault describes subcategories of heterotopias that he calls “crisis heterotopias” and “hetero-

topias of compensation.” Crisis heterotopias are “privileged,” “sacred” or “forbidden places reserved for individuals who are in a state of crisis,” such as, he suggests, “adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc” (24). Crisis heterotopias, he says, may be boarding schools, places of military service, honeymoon hotels, or places without geographical markers (24–25). We may then read the mills, as I will show, as potential crisis heterotopias. Heterotopias of compensation may also stem from the crisis heterotopia and often create a sort of concessionary space that is “perfect”, “meticulous” and “well arranged” (25, 27). In these space “existence [i]s regulated at every turn” by complex sets of social relations (27). The Mill Girls’ narratives constitute material artifacts arising from a crisis heterotopia and a heterotopia of compensation, as they reflect multiple discourses about how the physical spaces of the mills and boarding houses impacted their minds and bodies.

The physical architecture of the Lowell Mills was based on a design first developed in nearby Waltham, Massachusetts. The Waltham Mill, a cotton textile mill built in 1814 along the Charles River, was “the first vertically integrated factory in the United States, which means that all operations for cloth production were accomplished under one roof” (National Park Service 1985). The “physical form, structural system, and construction technique” of the Waltham Mill would eventually serve as inspiration for the Lowell Mills (National Park Service 1985).

The site of the Lowell Mills was first developed in 1821. The Lowell Mills originally comprised the four Boott Mills (see Fig. 2), which were built in the 1830s and based on the Waltham design. The standard design for the mill at Waltham

was rectangular, 150’-160’ [45-49 metres] long (reflecting the dependability of interior overhead line shafting) by 40’-50’ [12-15 metres] wide (the optimum for spaces relying on exterior windows for natural light). The four stories of open floor space had a dormer-lit gable roof, brick construction with stone foundations, and a full-height exterior stair tower centered in one of the long elevations. (National Park Service 1985)

The Boott Mills at Lowell were similarly designed as “four rectangular brick ‘boxes’ [that] each had

four stories and a dormer-lit attic, water wheels, and a basement. Stair towers centrally located on the exterior of each building provided access to upper floors” (National Park Service 1985). An understanding of the form and structure of the mills is important for understanding their impact on the lives of the mill workers. Moreover, their narratives often reflect their situatedness within a complex community governed by social norms and practices. Ultimately, I argue that the material culture reflected in their narratives encourages the reader to think about the lives of the Mills Girls in new ways, or with greater levels of empathy and understanding.

### Exterior Architecture of the Mills

In “A Second Peep at Factory Life,” Josephine L. Baker, either a female operative at the mills or a persona created by a mill worker, takes her reader on an imaginary walk around the exterior landscape of the mills and the interior space of one of the factories. She says: “There is an old saying that ‘When we are with the Romans, we must do as the Romans do.’ And now, kind friend, as we are about to renew our walk, I beg that you will give heed to it, and do as factory girls do. After this preliminary, we will proceed to the factory” (Eisler 1998: 77). She goes on to describe the mill itself as an aesthetically pleasing, though perhaps intimidating structure:

There is the “counting-room,” a long, low, brick building, and opposite is the “store-house,” built of the same material, after the same model. Between them, swings the ponderous gate that shuts the mills in from the world without. But, stop; we must get “a pass,” ere we go through, or “the watchman will be after us.” Having obtained this, we will stop on the slight elevation by the gate, and view the mills. The one to the left rears high its huge sides of brick and mortar, and the belfry, towering far above the rest, stands out in bold relief against the rosy sky. The almost innumerable windows glitter, like gems, in the morning sunlight. (Eisler 1998: 77)

This passage illustrates what Foucault refers to as a crisis heterotopia. That is, the mill, depending on how the worker perceives it at any given moment, may indeed be understood as a “privileged,” “sacred” or “forbidden” place, reserved for certain individuals (1986: 25). This writer seems

intimidated or awe-struck by the mills. Here, it is helpful to consider, as one senior park ranger described, that prior to coming to the mills, these young women had likely never before seen a building taller than the churches in the small, rural towns in which they grew up (anonymous, personal communication, March 10, 2007). Thus, these physical structures would likely be intimidating. We may then imagine this writer looking up at the buildings, with their “huge sides of brick and mortar,” and at the ponderous gate, and feeling physically quite small in comparison.

In the narrative “Letters from Susan: Letter First,” Susan describes to a friend similar feelings of reverence and intimidation associated with life at the mills. In this letter, Susan describes her initial impressions upon arriving at the mill:

It all appears very romantic to me. The driver carried me to the “corporation,” as it is called; and which, so far as I now can describe it, is a number of short parallel streets with high brick blocks on either side. (Eisler 1998: 46)

Susan’s reference here to the “corporation” is common throughout narratives in the *Offering*, and perhaps alludes not only to the mill as a physical structure, but also to the idea of the mill as a social structure or enterprise. Moreover, Susan’s description of the place as “romantic” and containing “high brick blocks” gives the impression the mills charm her. In this passage, then, we can perhaps see Susan becoming enculturated to both the social and physical structure of the mills.

By Susan’s third letter, published just three months later, in the August 1844 volume of the *Offering*, we see a clear transition in her view of mill life. It is summer, and the heat has exacerbated the difficulties of mill work:

You complain that I do not keep my promise of being a good correspondent, but if you could know how sultry it is here, and how fatigued I am by my work in this warm weather, you would not blame me. It is now that I begin to dislike these hot brick pavements, and glaring buildings. I want to be at home—to go down to the brook over which the wild grapes have made a natural arbor, and to sit by the cool spring around which the fresh soft brakes cluster so lovingly. (Eisler 1998: 56)

The “short parallel streets with high brick blocks on either side” that Susan described upon arriving at the mills (46) have now become “hot brick

pavements, and glaring buildings” (56). Her work has made her tired and she is nostalgic for the brook she used to visit at home. We may read this passage as indicative of crisis heterotopia with little room to divert from social norms. That is, the very buildings that at one time symbolized a privileged or sacred place have now begun to lose their allure, and have instead become associated with heat, fatigue and perseverance. Figs. 3 and 4, contemporary photographs of former mill structures at what is today the Lowell Mills National Historical Park, depict the sort of “high brick blocks” and structures to which this mill worker could have been referring.

### Dining Rooms and Boarding Houses

In Susan’s first letter, she describes her initial experience of dining in the boarding house as intimidating:

You can hardly think how my heart beat when I heard the bells ring for the girls to come to supper, *and then* the doors began to slam, *and then* Mrs. C. took me into the dining-room, where there were three common-sized tables, and she seated me at one of them, *and then* the girls thickened around me, until I was almost dizzy. (1998: 47; emphasis added)

The sound of the bells—a common theme expressed in many of the narratives—makes Susan anxious. Moreover, the writer’s use of *anaphora*, the “repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences, or lines,” in the repetition of “and then,” and *polysyndeton*, the use of one or more conjunctions “between clauses” (Silva Rhetoricæ 2007), arguably quickens the pace of this passage, perhaps conveying a sense of anxiety, reflecting Susan’s experience and the density and overwhelming feeling of the dining room.

Similarly, in “A Week in the Mill,” an anonymous Mill Girl comments on the anonymity and cacophony of the dining room during breakfast:

Soon the breakfast bell rings; in a moment the whirling wheels are stopped, and she hastens to join the throng which is pouring through the open gate. At the table she mingles with a various group. Each despatches [*sic*] the meal hurriedly, though not often in silence; and if, as is sometimes the case, the rules of politeness are not punctiliously observed by all, the excuse of some lively country girl would be, “They

don’t give us time for *manners*.” (Eisler 1998: 75; emphasis in original)

Here we see the theme of the bell as a mechanism of control meant to maintain order and efficiency. The girls eat “hurriedly,” and if the “rules of politeness” are not observed, as this writer puts it, it’s because “they don’t give [them] time for *manners*” (75). This environment hardly fosters a dining experience that is supportive or relaxing; rather, the dining room, or “eating-room,” as it is described in “Home in a Boarding-House” is merely, as the first writer observes, “a place to eat and lodge in” (Eisler 1998: 73). For Foucault, the bell as a means of controlling bodies exercises “a subtle coercion” at the level of “movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body” (Foucault 1977: 137).



**Fig. 3**  
Former mill structures (now part of Lowell Mills National Historical Park), just under main arches of the park entrance. (Photo by author.)



Here, the bell guides or controls the Mill Girls' movement.

Likewise, the writer of "Home in a Boarding-House" implicitly describes how the material culture of both the dining room and the chambers contributes to overcrowding and lack of comfort. The dining room, she says, is

always amply furnished with chairs and tables, though but little of anything else, for, amidst all our deprivations, we have never been deprived of the privilege of sitting at our meals. Chairs, chairs—one, two, three, four, and so on to forty. It is really refreshing, sometimes, to go where there is only now and then a chair. This pleasure we can usually enjoy, by leaving the dining-room for our chambers, where there is not often a surplus of this article of furniture; but then there are always plenty of trunks, boxes, etc., which will answer for seats, and the bed is easily persuaded to stand proxy for a sofa. (Eisler 1998: 73-74)

Interestingly, here, we may notice a sort of irony, or *cataphasis*, in which the writer "explicitly affirms the negative qualities" that she then "passes over" (Silva Rhetoricæ 2007). That is, the writer

notes the overcrowding brought on by too many chairs (emphasized by the repetition of the word "chairs") in the dining room, and the simultaneous discomfort brought on by a lack of comfortable seating and furniture in their chambers. With this subtle rhetorical move, then, she manages to integrate a critique of mill life, but by framing the situation as something positive. Here, chairs, as artifacts of daily life, have become so ubiquitous that the writer views them as obstacles to be overcome; however, by framing the presence of the chairs as a "surplus," she is able to diplomatically integrate a critique of the physical environment without levying a direct criticism. Susan's first letter also describes the process of being shown to her bedroom in the boarding house: "I was shown up three flights of stairs, into what is called 'the long attic'—where they put all poor stranger girls—the most objectionable places being always left for new comers [*sic*]" (Eisler 1998: 48). Again, the physical structure of the flights of stairs and the long attic create a context in which the physical spaces of everyday life are obstacles to overcome or endure.

Fig. 4

Former mills (now Visitor Center of the Lowell Mills National Historical Park), at main arches of the park entrance. (Photo by author.)



## Plants and Flowers in the Mills

The presence of plants and flowers in the mills for aesthetic purposes is a theme cited in several Mill Girls' narratives and reflects the mill owners' interest in creating a material culture that would allow workers to feel more at home in their environment. In a narrative titled "The Pleasures of Factory Life," writer and mill worker Sarah Bagley notes:

In the mills, we are not so far from God and nature, as many persons might suppose. We cultivate and enjoy much pleasure in cultivating flowers and plants. A large and beautiful variety of plants is placed around the walls of the rooms, giving them more the appearance of a flower garden than a workshop. It is there we inhale the sweet perfume of the rose, the lily, and geranium; and, with them, send the sweet incense of sincere gratitude to the bountiful Giver of these rich blessings. (Eisler 1998: 64)

Here, Bagley describes the presence of plants affectionately, noting that they make the factory feel more like a "flower garden than a workshop." On the one hand, we may read the inclusion of plants and flowers as a genuine effort to improve

morale and perhaps air quality in these crowded spaces. On the other hand, we may consider the plants and flowers as representing what Foucault refers to as a heterotopia of compensation, whereby a meticulous, well-arranged space is created in an effort to mask or offset difficult working conditions. In another narrative called “Plants and Flowers in the Mills,” a mill worker writes:

It is especially gratifying to behold [plants and flowers] thriving beneath the kindly care of the female operatives in our factories. In the dressing-room of No. 3 on the Boott Corporation, we counted over 200 pots of plants and flowers! This is probably the largest number congregated in any apartment in the city. (Eisler 1998: 64)

In noting over 200 potted plants and flowers in this building alone, this writer paints a similarly generous portrait of the mill owners and superintendents—another common theme in these narratives. Here, descriptions of natural objects reveal the attempts of the mill owners to construct, from nature, an artificial environment that will feel inviting to young women coming from rural farming communities. Again, for example, as we return to Susan’s letters, it’s clear that she knows that her imagined reader has a less than ideal mental image of mill life. To allay these concerns, Susan writes in “Letter Third”:

But these mills are not such dreadful places as you imagine them to be. You think them dark damp holes; as close and black as—as the Black Hole at Calcutta. Now, dear M., it is no such thing. They are high spacious well-built edifices, with neat paths around them, and beautiful plots of greensward. These are kept fresh by the “force-pumps” belonging to every corporation. And some of the corporations have beautiful flower gardens connected with the factories. One of the overseers, with whom I am acquainted, gave me a beautiful bouquet the other morning, which was radiant with all the colors of the rainbow, and fragrant with the sweet perfume of many kinds of mints and roses. (Eisler 1998: 56)

Susan then goes on to describe the interior rooms, which are “kept nicely whitewashed,” and the clean dress and neat appearance of the women: “The mill girls are the prettiest in the city” (56). On the one hand, by describing the mills as including “beautiful plots of greensward” and “beautiful gardens,” and by noting a gift

of a bouquet “radiant with all the colors of the rainbow,” Susan portrays the mills as idyllic and in tune with the natural world.

On the other hand, these “plots of greensward” are “kept fresh” by artificial “force pumps” in every building. In this sense, the passage may also illustrate a heterotopia of compensation. That is, the mill owners seem to want to present a positive or contented, normative narrative of what it means to be a female operative; in doing so, they may be understood not only as regulating or managing existence “at every turn,” but also as creating “a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault 1986: 27).

### Layout and Materiality of the Looms and Other Machinery

Descriptions of pleasing aesthetics were not limited to objects from nature; the Mill Girls’ narratives also incorporated what are at times contradictory descriptions of tidy work rooms, of the challenges of learning to use the looms and of the cacophony of these environments (see Fig. 5-6). Susan’s second letter home notes that “the rooms were so light, spacious, and clean, the girls so pretty and neatly dressed, and the machinery so brightly polished or nicely painted” (Eisler 1998: 51). Susan’s third letter home also describes the interior of the mills, focusing predominantly on the aesthetically pleasing appearance of the loom rooms:

But I have said enough of the outside of our mills—now for the inside. The rooms are high, very light, kept nicely whitewashed, and extremely neat; with many plants in the window seats, and white cotton curtains to the windows. The machinery is very handsomely made and painted, and is placed in regular rows; thus, in a large mill, presenting a beautiful and uniform appearance. I have sometimes stood at one end of a row of green looms, when the girls were gone from between them, and seen the lathes moving back and forth, the harnesses up and down, the white cloth winding over the rollers, through the long perspective; and I have thought it beautiful. (Eisler 1998: 57)

Here, the *asyndeton*, or “omission of conjunctions between clauses, often resulting in a hurried rhythm or vehement effect” (Silva Rhetoricæ

2007), of “the lathes moving back and forth, the harnesses up and down, the white cloth winding over the rollers, through the long perspective” not only serves to hurry the reader along but also provides a sort of distanced, aerial view of the room. Moreover, the mention of whitewashing, “extreme” neatness, white cotton curtains and “white cloth” winding over the rollers portray a sterile and orderly but bright and spacious environment. Plants in the windows again introduce a natural element into this artificial environment. Moreover, the placement of machinery in “regular rows” to present a “beautiful and uniform appearance” again reflects the ways in which material artifacts were used to create order and discipline at the mills.

Writing with similar sentiments, the author of “A Second Peep at Factory Life” takes her reader on an imaginary walk through a room that is used for cleaning cloth. She says:

We will just look into the first room. It is used for cleaning cloth. You see the scrubbing and scouring machines are in full operation, and gigging and fulling are going on in full perfection.... In the second room the cloth is “finished,” going through the various operations of burling, shearing, brushing, inking, fine-drawing, pressing, and packing for market. This is the pleasantest room on the corporation, and consequently they are never in want of help.... We will pass to the third room, called the “cassimere weaving-room,” where all kinds of clothes are woven, from plain to the most exquisite fancy. There are between eighty and ninety looms.... The fourth is the “broad weaving-room,” and contains between thirty and forty looms; and broad sure enough they are. Just see how lazily the lathe drags backward and forward, and the shuttle—how spitefully it hops from one end of it to another. But we must not stop longer, or perchance it will hop at us. (Eisler 1998: 77; emphasis in original)

In this description of the spatial layout of the rooms and machinery we can see that the material culture of the mills is also a product of economic growth in the region. This narrative, published in 1845, notes between eighty and ninety looms in the cassimere weaving room, and between thirty and forty looms in the broad weaving room. These references perhaps reflect the growing consumer demand for textile goods, and the growth of industrialization not only in New England but also throughout the United States and Europe.

The need for additional looms eventually had an impact on the physical environment and layout of the mills, which “were built either as a series of similar structures, or constructed so they could easily be expanded” (National Park Service 1985). According to a senior park ranger, a typical weaving room eventually contained up to two hundred looms (anonymous, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

This writer’s narrative also emphasizes the room’s materiality. That is, the presence of the dash before “how spitefully it hops” produces a sort of “hopping” effect itself. The writer’s use of punctuation mimics the “hopping,” thus allowing for a more empathetic understanding of the Mill Girls’ lives. In the next sentence, the writer’s denial of any request to “stop longer” perhaps reflects the writer’s own hesitance to pause, and her perceived need to keep moving and working. Interestingly, while this writer seems impressed and humbled by the number of looms—eighty or ninety in one room, thirty or forty in another—she alludes to unsafe working conditions. She warns her reader not to stop in front of the lathe and shuttle. Again, the narrative describes the challenges of mill life; the weaving room represents a crisis heterotopia, signalled by the writer’s simultaneous fear and reverence of this material artifact, or the lathe’s power—how easily it does its job, and how easily it could cause physical harm. Moreover, the author’s suggestion here that the lathe and shuttle could “hop at us” presents a subtle reference that the looms are dangerous. Interestingly, this narrative was published in 1845, around the time that the textile industry was growing at a steady pace. During this period, working conditions in the Lowell Mills purportedly deteriorated “as the speed of factory machines accelerated and as each worker worked at more machines at a faster pace,” thus potentially putting at risk the health and safety of workers (Harvard University Library 2014).

By the late 19th century, in response to public concerns about workplace safety, most U.S. states had established bureaus of labour statistics. Massachusetts “set up the first such bureau in 1869” (U.S. Department of Labor 2014), and the Massachusetts Bureau published its first annual report in 1870, which focused primarily on “accidents to children working in textile mills, paper mills and other establishments” (U.S. Department

of Labor 2014). While pertaining to a period later than that of the 1845 “Second Peep” narrative, it is perhaps worth noting that the Bureau’s 1871 annual report “found that ventilation in the Lowell Mills was poor because the windows had to be kept closed during the manufacture of certain types of fabric” (U.S. Department of Labor 2014). In 1874, Bureau investigators visited most of the mills in Massachusetts, “checking machine guarding, ventilation, protection of shafting, fire escapes elevators, and amounts of air space per worker. They found shafting and machines guarded fairly well, though air space was not always adequate” (U.S. Department of Labor 2014). Thus, the writer of “A Second Peep at Factory Life” may very well be alluding to her concern for workplace safety at the mills.

### Operating the Machinery

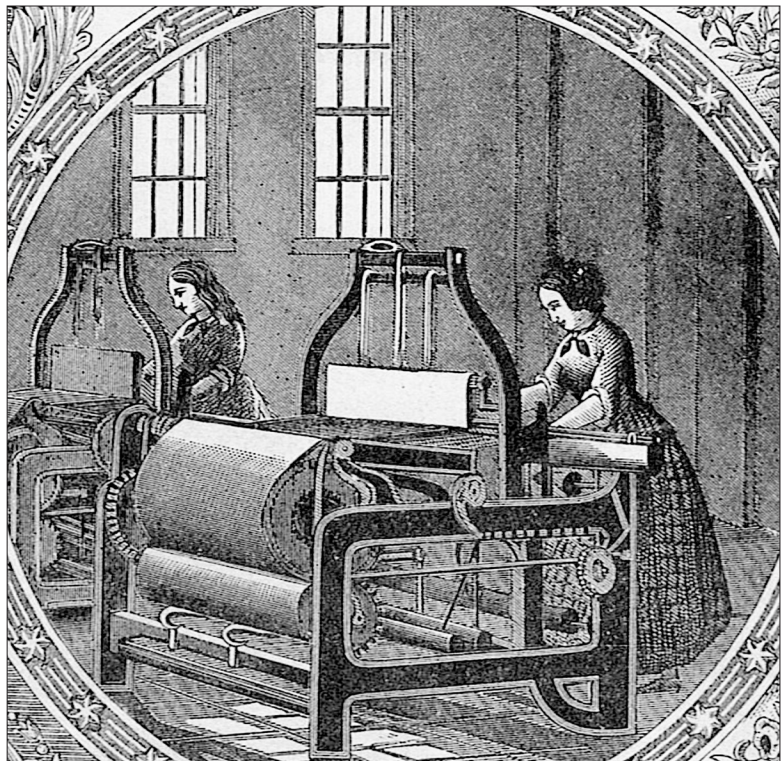
Susan’s second letter home arguably portrays some of the richest and most subversive descriptions of the bodily impact of mill life. In this letter, Susan describes in detail her introduction to the carding room, the spinning room and the dressing room and the tasks carried out in each. She describes the benefits and challenges of each role and the reasons she chose to be a weaver and work in the spinning room rather than the dressing room, along with her experience of learning to operate the looms.

The carding room, she says, is “where the dust flies the most,” and where “the girls get the dirtiest” (Eisler 1998: 51). Eisler notes that air pollution by way of dust and “flying lint” was indeed an issue at the mills (1998: 28). Working in the carding room is relatively easy, however, and Susan notes that “the females are allowed time to go out at night before the bell rings” (51). The spinning room, by contrast, is “neat and pretty.” The spinners and doffers work here, she says; the spinners must “watch the frames; keep them clean; and the threads mended if they break. The doffers take off the full bobbins, and put on the empty ones” (51). The spinners and doffers, Susan says, also have relatively easy jobs, and “have nothing to do in the long intervals when the frames are in motion, and can go out to their boardinghouses, or do anything else that they like” (51).

Working in the dressing room is considerably more difficult and earns better wages than other positions, and Susan describes the environment as more challenging. On the one hand, the dressers, who work in the dressing room, tend not to work before breakfast and can “stay out a great deal in the afternoons” (51). However, while the dressing rooms are “very neat,” and while the “frames move with a gentle undulating motion which is really graceful,” the rooms are “kept very warm,” and are “disagreeably scented with the ‘sizing,’ or starch, which stiffens the ‘beams,’ or unwoven webs” (51). As Eisler also describes, these rooms were kept very humid to prevent breakage in threads, and so “the air had to be sprayed regularly with water and the windows nailed shut” (28). Susan also writes in this passage that “there are many plants in these rooms, and it is a really good green house for them” (Eisler 1998: 51). Citing once again the challenging work environment of the dressing room, Susan comments that “the dressers are generally quite tall girls, and must have pretty tall minds, too, as their work requires much care and attention” (52).

While the dressers’ work is taxing both physically and mentally, it is the weavers, Susan says, who have the most difficult task of all, especially “if they choose to take charge of three or four

*Fig. 5*  
*Two Mill Girls at*  
*their looms. Cloth label*  
*from the Merrimack*  
*Manufacturing*  
*Company, Lowell,*  
*MA, ca. 1840-1860.*  
*(American Textile*  
*History Museum.)*



looms” (51). Citing overcrowding, the weavers, Susan writes, “are the most constantly confined” (51). Nonetheless, even though the weavers have the most difficult job, when faced with the prospect of working in the dressing room, Susan chooses to work as a weaver instead: “I could have had work in the dressing room, but chose to be a weaver; and I will tell you why. I disliked the closer air of the dressing-room, though I might have become accustomed to that” (52). Here, the writer makes so bold a statement as to say that the poor ventilation of the dressing room is actually a deciding factor in choosing to work a more difficult job. We may also presume that jobs in the spinning room were perhaps harder to come by and not readily available to her.

Susan describes her weaving work to take place “in the mill,” which is where she then learns to operate the looms for the first time (52). Of learning to operate the looms, she writes:

Well, I went into the mill, and was put to learn with a very patient girl—a clever old maid.... You cannot think how odd every thing seemed to me. I wanted to laugh at every thing, but did not know what to make sport of first. They set me to threading shuttles, and tying weaver’s knots, and such things, and now I have improved so that I can take care of one loom. I could take care of two if only I had eyes in the back part of my head, but I have not got

used to “looking two ways of a Sunday” yet. (Eisler 1998: 52)

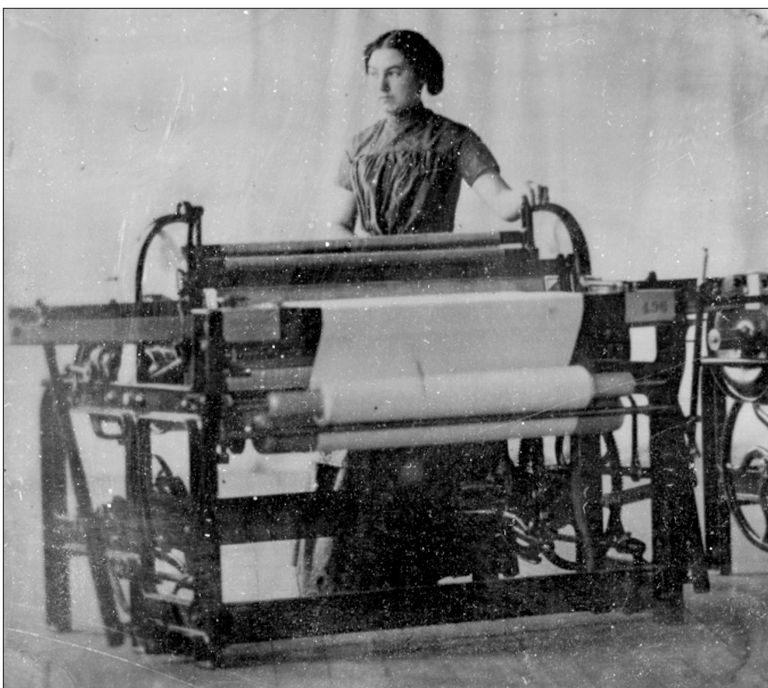
Susan describes a material culture in which the space itself is new, or “odd,” as she puts it. The learning curve for operating the loom is clearly steep. While it was common practice for workers to operate multiple looms at a time, Susan struggles to operate just one. The rows of green looms that she once considered to be beautiful artifacts are portrayed as “odd” and requiring great care. Passages such as this again demonstrate how the material objects of mill life can become mechanisms of discipline and control. That is, the looms require her direct and undivided attention; they control her body and represent the sort of conflicted space, or heterotopic space of the mills—work that is simultaneously a privilege and exhausting.

In the passages that follow, Susan describes the impact of the noise of the looms on her psyche. She attempts to downplay the impact of this noise as she learns to operate the looms; however, it is easy to see that the noise has taken a toll her physical well-being:

At first the hours seemed very long, but I was so interested in learning that I endured it very well; and when I went out at night the sound of the mill was in my ears, as of crickets, frogs, and jewsharps, all mingled together in a strange discord. After that it seemed as though cotton-wool was in my ears, but now I do not mind at all. You know that people learn to sleep with the thunder of Niagara in their ears, and a cotton mill is no worse, though you wonder that we do not have to hold our breath in such a noise. (Eisler 1998: 52)

What she describes here, the sound of the mills still in her ears well after leaving the loom rooms, in fact sounds like tinnitus—a perception of ringing in the ears when “no external source is present,” often brought on by repeated exposure to loud noises (American Tinnitus Association 2013). While she attempts to downplay her (possible) tinnitus by stating that she has adapted to the ringing in her ears, her letters nevertheless make a statement about working conditions in the mills—that they likely caused health problems—and her narrative serves the more subversive purpose of describing the challenges of mill life in a publication often critiqued for its goal of neutrality.

**Fig. 6**  
*Woman at power loom.*  
 Daguerreotype ca. 1850.  
 (American Textile  
 History Museum.)



Susan goes on to describe the swollen extremities that result from long hours of operating the looms. In doing so, she adopts an almost martyr-like attitude:

It makes my feet ache and swell to stand so much, but I suppose I shall get accustomed to that too. The girls generally wear old shoes about their work, and you know nothing is easier; but they almost all say that when they have worked here a year or two they have to procure shoes a size or two larger than before they came. The right hand, which is the one used in stopping and starting the loom, becomes larger than the left; but in other respects the factory is not detrimental to a young girl's appearance. (Eisler 1998: 52)

With this passage, we can see very clearly the impact of mill work on her body: her feet ache and swell after long hours of operating the looms, and her hand is developing what we might refer to today as a repetitive stress injury. Nonetheless, she downplays the issue: "the factory is not detrimental to a young girl's appearance." By minimizing the physical impact on the body with martyr-like phrases like "I suppose I shall get accustomed to that too," and by describing and then downplaying the challenges of operating the looms, Susan is able to levy a subtle and diplomatic critique of mill life's toll on the body.

## Conclusion

The passages in the narratives in the *Lowell Offering* reflect the tension between the Mill Girls' desire to tell their stories, and the mill owners' attempt to control those stories and the portrayal of the mills to the outside world. Such attempts at control may take the form of publishing narratives that minimize any critique of mill life, or that critique it in a diplomatic way, much like the descriptions of the chairs and furniture in "Home in a Boarding-House," or the descriptions of the physical toll of operating the looms in Susan's letters.

While activists like Sarah Bagley and labour papers like the *Voice of Industry* did critique the *Offering's* policy of neutrality, the Mill Girls clearly challenge these attempts to de-politicize the publication. Indeed, we see that the narratives reflect a material culture in which the artifacts and spaces of the mills act on their minds and bodies. As a result, narratives published in the

*Lowell Offering* both convey and suppress the individualized, embodied experiences of the Mill Girls, as they worked with and against the hegemonic constructions of mill life. These narratives reflect the underlying disciplinary mechanisms at work in the mill owners' attempts to maintain a politics of neutrality in the *Offering*, and the Mill Girls' attempts to push back against those efforts. As such, the *Lowell Offering*, while providing the women at the Lowell Mills with a forum in which to voice their opinions, actually functions as a crisis heterotopia that reflects the dissonance experienced by the Mill Girls as they at once acknowledge and downplay their oppression in what may be a rhetorically strategic move, but one that disciplines their writing nonetheless.

One goal of this study has been to show how studies of material culture can be extended by exploring the rhetorical dimensions of material culture. I argue here that to understand their texts both as symbolic and as arising out of a physical experience of their material surroundings, means to understand their individualized, lived experiences with a sort of empathy that might not otherwise be available to us. Descriptions of the spatial layout of factory spaces and looms reflect economic growth in the region and the impact of that growth on workers' bodies. The presence of plants and flowers in the mills reflects the mill owners' implicit interest in fostering a material culture that would allow mill workers to feel more comfortable and at home in their physical environment. The Mill Girls' textual descriptions of the architecture of the mills reflects a material culture that perpetuates fear and reverence of these institutions, and that often takes a physical and emotional toll on the workers as a result. Narrative descriptions of the physical and mental impact of flights of stairs, attic spaces and dining room furniture demonstrate how objects of everyday life become mechanisms of discipline and control.

An analysis of the rhetorical dimensions of material culture illuminates the impacts of material culture on the mind and body, specifically, in this case, as it pertains to the lives of the Mill Girls. For, as Vicki Tolar Collins notes, to better "understand and critique the function of women's rhetoric in the cultural formation of women's lives," we must closely examine "embodied texts" and their "material elements" (1999: 546). This

examination then allows us to experience the lives of the Mill Girls with greater empathy and corporeal understanding than if we were to overlook the material nature of their narratives and the impact of the mills on their bodies. This article extends ideas about material culture to demonstrate how, when we are more attuned to

the material dimensions of the text, we experience those texts as more visceral, tangible and rhetorically powerful. To read the narratives of the Mill Girls as material, rhetorical texts, then, ultimately helps shape our understanding and imagining of mill life and allows us to engage with greater empathy in the Mill Girls' lives and struggles.

## Notes

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1. While the precise origin of the term "Mill Girls" is uncertain, it appears to have come into usage around the late 19th century. The first usage in the title of a *Lowell Offering* article, for example, appears to be in the March 1842 volume, with the piece by mill worker Eliza Jane Cate, entitled "Leisure Hours of the Mill Girls" (series 2). Harriet Farley, writing under the pen name "Susan," also uses the term in an August 1844 narrative entitled "Letters from Susan: Letter Third," when she notes that "the mill girls are the prettiest in the city" (series 4). The term "Mill Girls" also seems to have developed from the phrase "Factory Girls," and readers of the *Offering* will notice "Factory Girls" used synonymously with "Mill Girls" both before and after the March 1842 issue.
2. According to archival records, the December 1845 issue (series 5, no. 12) shown here would have been

the final volume of the magazine. Note the presence of natural imagery in the cover drawing: plants, flowers, a garden trellis and a beehive on the left. The young woman carries a book with her, indicating her close connection to literature and education, while what is likely a representation of Boott Mills stands in the background.

3. Harriet Farley later went on to edit the *New England Offering*, which was published in Lowell, MA, 1847-1850. While the paper first included writings by current or former female mill workers, it later accepted contributions from "all American female manual workers" (Ranta 2013). The paper lasted only two years and contained "fiction, poetry, essays, historical and travel narratives, engravings, editorials, and book reviews" (Ranta 2013).
4. The author "Thomas" in this quotation refers to Reverend Abel C. Thomas, who was one of the original organizers and editors of the *Lowell Offering*. Harriet Farley served as an editor of the publication 1842-1845.
5. The labour reform rhetoric in the *Voice of Industry* was much more charged and direct than the *Lowell Offering*; it often included sections of proposed legislation, and addressed a readership beyond that of the antebellum Mill Girl, speaking also to the influx of immigrant workers in the late 1800s (Ruparell 2013). Other labour magazines about factory life were published sporadically throughout the 1840s; among them were such publications as the *Factory Girls' Garland* and *Factory Girls' Album*. These and others like them were short-lived, however, and rarely contained articles or editorials that conveyed "the sense of immediacy, personal observation, and dailiness" like the *Offering* did with such nuance (Eisler 1998: 41).

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