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“I feel more connected. That’s why we work for less, we like the people and the books.” : Bookselling and Community in The Greater Seattle Area

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**“I FEEL MORE CONNECTED. THAT’S WHY WE WORK FOR LESS, WE LIKE THE
PEOPLE AND THE BOOKS.” : BOOKSELLING AND COMMUNITY IN THE
GREATER SEATTLE AREA**

By

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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**SEO YOUNG PARK, SCRIPPS COLLEGE
GEORGIA HARTMAN, PITZER COLLEGE**

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Introduction

Looking over the pictures my mom sent me last fall, I am captivated by one particular series of images: slightly blurry, two young girls, blond hair slightly ruffled, pose in bathrobes, one pink, one blue. A series of images show the moments just before and after a handful of confetti is thrown by each into the air in front of a row of towering bookcases. In another each girl is perched on tall stools behind a counter, leaning over the desk covered in wrapping paper together. In the final picture, taken from the outside and through the window, the girl in blue is smiling, her face surrounded on either side by a display window full of holiday books and paper snowflakes. As I look at each picture I can almost see the girls, my twin sister in pink and me in blue, scampering around the bookstore my family owned that Christmas morning. I don't recall why we were there, my mom tells me that they got a call that the Christmas tree in the store had tipped over, but I do remember how it felt. I remember that the excitement Katie and I always had when we got to play in the bookstore after hours exponentially magnified, it being Christmas morning, pushing us into a gleeful if slightly chaotic frenzy. There is nothing quite like the exhilaration one experiences sliding on the hardwood floor past shelf after shelf of books in fluffy sock clad feet and a blue bathrobe on Christmas morning, the shop empty except for my dad and one of my sisters. Growing up when other kids asked, as children are wont to do, what my dad did for work, it was always with a sense of pride that I answered, "he owns The Bookstore." Not Eagle Harbor Books, just The Bookstore because on the island, when you say, "The Bookstore" everyone knows where you mean. Now, years later, after we sold Eagle Harbor Books and even with the introduction of a lovely little travel bookstore, Eagle Harbor Books is still The Bookstore to me. It was, outside of school and home, the third place in my life growing up, sometimes, like that one Christmas morning, it was even a

second home. I saw many of the people who worked there far more regularly than my aunts and uncles, and some of them still work there today. They played with my sisters and I, found us books to read, occasionally reprimanded us when we got under foot, guided me through my first job. The Bookstore was my community.

Years later, sitting at a round table in the rear of the large room filled with people also seated at tables like mine I could not help but be reminded of the sense of familiarity and closeness I had always felt in The Bookstore growing up. As I looked around, I noticed how many of these people seemed to know each other. Even as the first speaker rose from the table on the stage to walk to the podium, signaling those assembled to fall quiet, many continued to greet each other as old friends, in a fashion anyone from a small town might recognize. However, this town hall is unlike most others in more than one respect. Rather than members of a physically bounded community coming together to discuss local concerns, around me were booksellers¹ from all across the United States, but like a town hall, there was yet a sense of shared values, comradery, community.

Background

At the very beginning of this project I was fortunate enough to attend the 2018 BookExpo in New York with my father, where I sat in on the American Booksellers Association Town Hall Meeting described above. While there I was struck by the dissonance between narratives of the fate

¹ Though I recognize Wright's (2005) objections to the term 'bookseller,' as one that is both ambiguous and implicates the hierarchical value of the work, I have chosen to make use of it in this thesis because it was the word most often employed by those of my interlocutors who work in bookstores to describe themselves. To Wright's point, I would like to dispel some of the term's ambiguity by clarifying who I am including within the word 'bookseller.' I shall use 'bookseller' to describe any person who is employed in a bookstore and spends any amount of time working on the floor or at the front desk. This includes managers, store owners, sales staff, anyone, in short, who might happen to sell a book. In bookstores with separate warehouses or receiving staff (usually found only in large bookstores), the staff working in these departments would not be called to work with customers or sell books so I shall not refer to them as booksellers.

of book industry, and especially of independent bookstores. Despite their struggle since the advent of big box chains such as Borders and further decline with the launch of Amazon in 1995, independent bookstores have been steadily increasing in numbers over the last decade. Between 2009 and 2015, the number of independent bookstores in the United States increased by 35%, after having dropped by 43% between 1995 and 2000 (Raffaelli 2017, 2-3). Indeed, booksellers and other book industry members I encountered at the BookExpo reported optimistically, pointing to the growing number of new independent bookstores opening in the United States and the overall increase of book purchases. Yet there persists among many the perception that bookstores, and independent bookstores chief among them, are in decline, even that bookstores are trudging towards some inevitable extinction². This belief was even voiced on a recent episode of the highly popular television show Brooklyn Nine Nine³ as Terry yelled that “Terry doesn’t order books online, he supports local bookstores, they’re dying Amy!”

During the summer months I spent working at the well-known East Coast Books⁴, I was asked time and time again if we, the bookstore, were doing ‘alright,’ if we were ‘hanging in there,’ or told by various well-meaning customers that they wanted to help keep us open even though it was ‘more expensive’⁵ because they wanted to ‘help us out’. Even now, when people inevitably ask what I

² For an example, see Nisen’s 2013 article for Business Insider entitled *Why Bookstores are Doomed: these charts show just how bad things are for bookstores* which does an excellent job of misconstruing the findings of Baye et al’s working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research from 2013, *Searching for the Physical and Digital Media: the Evolution of Platforms for Finding Books* which found that, no surprise, Amazon is growing, and that people are decreasing their searches for books on open networks, bad news for Google and Bing (remember Bing?).

³ Brooklyn Nine Nine Season 6, episode 12.

⁴ This is a pseudonym, as are all the bookstore names mentioned throughout my thesis.

⁵ The notion that buying books from independent bookstores is more expensive, though not baseless, is often exaggerated or inaccurate. Unlike almost any other product, the price of a book, printed on the back cover, is physically built into the object at the time of manufacture. This prevents selling most books above the list price but also means, given that the average profit a bookstore can make on each book is predetermined both by the list price and the deal they receive from their supplier (the profit margin per a book is usually between forty and fifty percent). See www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/63764-net-pricing-is-it-time-to-take-prices-off-book-covers

am doing for my senior thesis, I am often met by similar exclamations about the tragic demise of independent bookstores.

These interactions indicated concern for the future of East Coast Books and for bookstores in general, and the doubt that they have one. Given the ideal location that provides high volumes of tourism year round and a local population of wealthy and voracious readers which make East Coast Books an especially prosperous bookstore, these comments are even more striking. The customers of even this prosperous bookstore anticipated its demise. Retired bookstore owner Mickey, with whom I spoke at length, confirmed that he too had encountered this, exclaiming, “that’s been the narrative...and the ABA has tried to...tell the media ‘hey we’re not dying out here!’ but it’s never gotten around.” The American Booksellers Association even has an entire page on their website titled “Bookstores are Thriving” which lists recent news stories detailing the resurgence of independent bookstores.⁶ In response to a question at this Town Hall meeting about the perception that independent bookstores, even when they are new or growing, are struggling, a board member responded that “we’re doing fine in an era of diminished expectations...we’ll say that we are doing good...[This is] a really fraught time and bookstores are community anchors...bookstores reassure communities.”

There are legal guidelines governing the discounts publishers sell their books at. These guidelines are designed to ensure that certain buyers are not given ‘unfair’ advantages in the industry. To cover their costs and see a sound financial return, bookstores must generally make a 60% profit on each book sold. Buyers often get discounts on larger quantities or through business relationships. One reason Amazon is able to sell some book for less than most other places is because Amazon does not have to achieve the same margin of profit that many brick and mortar stores do to stay afloat.

For example, the claim made by Crown Books that it discounted its entire inventory of books misleading at best: though Crown Books did indeed offer a 35% discount for books which appeared on the NY Times Bestseller list, all other books in the store were remainders. Remainders are new books marked significantly down in price by the publisher any number of reasons, because of a change in cover design, the release of the same book in paperback, or simple too many copies of a title for instance. Crown Books was by no means unique in the sale of remainders, which are, by definition, discounted, as all bookstores that carry remainders sell them at a similar, highly discounted price (Miller 2006, 167).

⁶ <https://www.bookweb.org/for-the-record>

It is in the context of these narratives that I developed my research question. As the onset of my research I quickly realized how little formal research exists on the subject of independent bookstores and booksellers, let alone in the field of anthropology. Though there are many questions that could be asked, I decided to investigate whom the survival of independent bookstores matters to and why in order to better understand the concept of community and the work of booksellers and independent bookstores, focusing mainly on the greater Seattle area. To guide my analysis I developed the following questions: *how are independent bookstores experienced as social spaces and as sources of community? How do bookstores and booksellers participate in a process of knowledge making? How do booksellers in the Seattle area conceptualize and experience their work?*

Methods

To investigate the significance independent bookstores hold for individuals and community, I conducted participant observation, in-depth interviews, and archival research on local news sources. During the summer before my senior year, in addition to working full time at East Coast Books, I conducted participant observation which, though I later narrowed my focus to the greater Seattle area, motivated my interest in the experiences and motivations of booksellers, which has continued to be a vital driving force in my investigation.

Though I discuss my own experience of working at East Coast Books in the Boston area, my main focus is the greater Seattle area. By this I mean the area between the Cascades, the mountain range separating Western and Eastern Washington, and the Olympic Peninsula. For the purposes of this project, the region included in the term 'greater Seattle area' extends 'across the water' to encompass all of Puget Sound. Despite the sprawl of Seattle and some of the surrounding cities, a

significant swath of this area is, if not always quite rural, at least dominated by forests and dotted with small towns. I recognize this designations is by no means perfect. However, for both the sake of clarity and maintaining the confidentiality of the stores and interlocuteurs I worked with, it is necessary. Though Western Washington certainly has a large number of independent bookstores, their numbers are not great enough that I could hope to give the more precise location of each I reference without revealing the actual store the booksellers I interviewed work at.

Additional participant observation was conducted, as I mentioned earlier, at the BookExpo conference in New York City. I chose to focus my study in the greater Seattle area because of the particularly high concentration of bookstores, Seattle has nineteen independent bookstores, and my own connections in the region through my family who owned an independent bookstore in the area for close to twenty years before selling it.

In the Seattle area I visited and conducted observation at six independent bookstores in the greater Seattle area, hereafter referred to as Black Bird Books, Puget Sound Book Company, Gracie's Book Shop, Evergreen Books in North Seattle and South Seattle, and Rainy Bay Books. I also visited two big box/chain bookstores, one each belonging to Amazon and Barnes & Noble, both also in the greater Seattle area.

The term 'big box' in the context of bookstores is used to refer to bookstores which are not owned by an individual or a family. Rather they are run as a corporation and are held accountable to a board of corporate shareholders and are usually intensely profit oriented. They are also quite large (as the phrase 'big box' implies), often, though not necessarily, in square footage of stores, and with many locations and a large consumer base. These big box bookstores are franchise stores, wherein most decisions, from inventory event to displays, are determined from a central corporate office,

relying heavily on statistical analysis data. With the demise of Borders in 2011, Barnes & Noble, Amazon, and Hudson New, are the only significant big box bookstores remaining in the United States. While there are numerous chain bookstores, stores with more than one location, other than the aforementioned stores, these are all independent bookstores. That is to say, they are bookstores which are privately owned, usually by an individual, family, or business partners, most often with a single location, occasionally with a few (rarely more than three) locations which are again usually concentrated within a particular region. Though independent bookstores can in this sense also be chain bookstores, I will use the designation 'big box/chain' to refer only to bookstores which, like Amazon and Barnes & Noble, are both chains and franchises. There are of course less organizational differences, including the less comfortable or personal 'feel' of a bookstore, but I will leave consideration of these for the chapters which follow.

Most of my observation in these places consisted of acting largely as most other bookstore customers would, browsing the different sections and displays, seeking out bookseller recommendations, and sitting in a cozy chair, with the slight difference that I took notes or, with store permission, pictures throughout this. I took most of my notes on my phone because, through past experience, I have noticed that people seem to notice someone texting on their phone less than they do someone frantically scribbling notes as they walk around and because being unobtrusive was generally better suited to my goal of observing the people and space around me. I chose to use my phone in short, because it seems to 'weird people out' less than the alternative. I spent a minimum of half an hour and up to two hours at a time in a store, returning to some two or three times. I was particularly interested in the sections and displays each store chose and how prominently they were featured.

Though I began some preliminary research over the summer of 2018, the bulk of it was conducted between September of 2018 and April of 2019. In September 2018, I began conducting interviews with booksellers using connections I had made at the BookExpo and others who I met through my eternally patient sister, a bookseller at an independent bookstore in the Greater Seattle area. I conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve booksellers, three of which I also had follow up interviews with. Of these, eleven work and live in the greater Seattle area. Their roles in the bookstore were varied: In the Seattle area June and Mickey are both owners, though Mickey is now retired, Thomas and Casey are store managers, Jack is an events manager, and Ruth, Lina, Freddie, Valerie, Meredith are all booksellers. As for the other two, Eliza worked as a bookseller in northern California and Allison is a shift manager and bookseller on the East Coast. Eight identify as women and four as men, most identify as white or did not offer an identification. Most have worked in independent bookstores for a number of years, with the exceptions of Lisa, who has been working there for less than a year, and Eliza who worked in a bookstore as an after school job. Thomas, Valerie, Allison, Casey, Jack, and each have ten or less years in the business. Ruth, Mickey, and June each have close to twenty years of experience working in bookstores, as has Freddie, though he took a seven year break from it. It is Meredith though, who takes the proverbial cake, with close to twenty three years working in independent bookstores in and around Seattle.

Later in my project I also contacted four supplementary interviews with bookstore customers, Moira, Susan, Lisa, and Jeanie, as a way to show their voices and to supplement the opinions offered by booksellers. These customers are all base in the town of Klickitat, aspects of which I have fictionalized, including the name. These semi-structured interviews allowed my interlocutors to lead the conversation, focusing on their own experiences, what they felt is most

important, and raising new themes and questions that might not otherwise have emerged during my research. This format also allowed me to ask questions on the topics I was interested in exploring without limiting the scope of my interlocutors' responses. For example, I asked those booksellers I interviewed very broadly how they would describe the work they do and what they feel its value is. This allowed the booksellers to explain what their jobs each entailed and gave them leeway to pinpoint the aspects of their work they are most drawn to and find most meaningful. It allowed them to define what is valuable to themselves. My findings are of course limited by the logistics of this project, especially the geographical difficulty of spending time in the greater Seattle area while attending school in Southern California.

Positionality

I have already given some indication of my connection to the book trade and now, I feel I must follow the anthropological tradition of acknowledging my positionality more explicitly. By way of the local independent bookstore my parents, both avid readers, owned until my father sold it a few years ago, I grew up in and around the bookselling world.

With great fondness I can recall the many hours I spent in the store with my sisters. We often read in the children section for what seemed like hours after closing, curled up in one of the large armchairs, each of which had at one time or another resided in our house, or otherwise sprawled on the floor, surrounded by piles of books. During these times, when the lights of the normally brightly lit space were dimmed to discourage after hours callers, the store became our domain. We could read anything, not that I can recall ever being told not to read a book or to wait until I was older to. It even seemed we could do anything we could do anything, short of climbing

the bookshelves, so long as we pick up after ourselves. After closing, the well polished floor, usually crowded with browsing customers, became a stage we could slide across in our sock clad feet, something that surely would not have been permitted at any other time. To us, it was ‘The Bookstore’, a proper noun because what other place could we possibly mean? Besides school and home, The Bookstore was where we spent most of our time.

It was also the space of my first, second, and third jobs. First as an unofficial paper shredder, for a dollar or two, then at various times working on the floor, assisting customers, shelving books, and performing various odd jobs. It was working in this capacity that I received my first ever pay check, which in all likelihood I misplaced immediately. I learned how to ring up my own purchases at an early age, though I never acted out the ‘selling’ part the bookseller, perhaps because customers might have found a child handling their money disconcerting. In many ways, The Bookstore, itself almost a living character, was a defining figure of my youth, feeding my curiosity and extending my sense of belonging to a place outside of our home.

I say this to illustrate the deeply personal connections and personal interests I came into this project with. I also brought assumptions about what a ‘proper’ bookstore is or should be, some of which, as in the case of the bookstore cafe which I mentioned earlier, I have had to reconsider. I cannot say whether my previous experience and knowledge of bookselling hindered or aided this project, though it probably did both at times. I am certain though that my experience motivated my interest. The time I spent working at East Coast Books, for instance, encouraged me to focus especially on the experience of other booksellers. Though I do not doubt that I would have received their support regardless of my thesis topic, my family has been perhaps uniquely positioned to provide feedback on my project.

Guiding Theory

My research is largely guided by existing theories of community and space, most particularly Hall's (2012) conception of social spaces, Elden's (2007) discussion of LeFebvre and the politicality of space, and Massey's (1994) concept of community, among others. I follow Nisbett's (2006) analysis of social spaces as "the unshaped social potential of a particular location" (129). In this way, bookstores are hyper social spaces, hubs of social gathering, interaction, and conversation, not unlike a local post office or grocery store wherein one might encounter the same people week after week and exchange news. Related to their sociality, the concept of community, itself a highly contested concept, is embedded within bookstores. Following Hall's argument of the inevitability of "allegiance and division" within social spaces, the inclusion and exclusion which takes place within bookstores as communities and social spaces is a driving focus in my research (26).

Following Foucault's (1997) discussion of knowledge/power, I discuss the ways in which bookstores, as physical physical collections and booksellers as distributors of knowledge act as intermediaries between individuals and knowledge. Framing the discussion of the work of bookselling, I also draw on Bilken. Bilken (1995) suggests that "the cultural construction of teachers gets accomplished not only by the attribution of meanings *to* teachers, buy also *by* the teacher," (143). I argue that this this also true for booksellers, that ways in which booksellers talk about themselves both reflects and contributes to the valuation of their work. How booksellers conceptualize their work is crucial to understanding why it matters to them and to analyzing the the significance of broader narratives around the survival of bookstores and bookselling.

In the spirit of understanding these narratives and the style in which independent bookstores are imagined, I rely on Anderson's (2006) argument that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). An independent bookstore, just as Anderson's example of the smallest nation, is an imagined community because its members will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). That is, the communities of Independent bookstores, individually and collectively, are imagined communities, not because they are larger than "primordial villages" but because many of their members never meet.

The works of organizational economist Robert Raffaelli and sociologist Laura J. Miller have vitally informed my discussion of the narrative of decline of independent bookstores and their actual resurgence. Raffaelli examines the methods employed by independent bookstores which have not only ensured their survival in the United States but also led to what Raffaelli terms their resurgence, in his work 'Reframing Collective Identity in Response to Multiple Technological Discontinuities: the Novel Resurgence of Independent Bookstores.' Similarly, Miller explores the conceptualization of the book trade and the implications of locating community in bookstores in her 1999 article, 'Shopping for community: the transformation of the bookstore into a vital community institution' and her 2006 book, 'Reluctant Capitalists.'

Arguments

I argue that the contradictions of inclusion/exclusion and community are visibly played out within independent bookstores, which work to foster a sense of community for customers and staff through local involvement and shared values. In this way, a sense of community is created not only in the space of bookstores but also by the space. Through the particular curation of the store, its space comes to embody individual values and political positions. Highly curated spaces which facilitate the dissemination of knowledge and information, independent bookstores are also retail spaces which are not traditionally seen as sources of community. As both retail spaces and social/community spaces, the independent bookstores in the greater Seattle area illustrate the multidimensional character of community and the inevitable exclusion which, rather than contradicting the notion of community, is inherently a part of community. Drawing boundaries creates exclusion, which are necessary in defining community. Customers and booksellers both experience variations of exclusion, and the unstable access to community it produces. This is the paradox of community.

The customers and booksellers experiencing the instability that accompanies a community located within retail are also those whom the survival of independent bookstores matters to because it is within these spaces that they identify community, connect with others, and exchange ideas.

In Chapter One, I will give a brief overview of the history of bookselling. I also discuss how independent bookstores are experienced as social spaces in which community is located for some. As Miller and Rafaelli both note, this is at least in part a tactic developed by booksellers in response to the looming threat of big box/chain bookstores like Borders and online retailers, most notably Amazon. In Chapter Two I examine the politics of space through the exercise of individual agency

and expression. I consider the ways in which Booksellers curate this space through shelving and staff recommended books and display and inventory selection. This curation also participates in the formations of community and how it is experienced by customers and booksellers, discussed in Chapters One and Three, respectively. In Chapter Three I focus on the experience of booksellers, how they came into the vocation, why they continue in it, and how they conceptualize their labor. I also consider the ways instability is experienced and exclusion conceived of by Seattle area bookselling. In my concluding chapter I consider possible areas for further study.

CHAPTER 1: Social Spaces and Community within Bookstores

In order to answer the question of to whom does the survival of independent bookstores matter and why, I will explore in this chapter the ways in which independent bookstores are experienced and conceptualized as social spaces by bookstore employees and visitors. A social space is a bounded area, such as a building or store, in which people are not only able to interact with one another but have a tendency to do so for the sake not just of a task or job but also for pleasure. These are often spaces in which you might encounter familiar people, some of whom you may even form connections or friendships with, on each visit. To this end, I will discuss the experience of visiting independent bookstore and their appeal with reference to their counterparts, big box/ chain bookstores. Through this exploration, I will show that independent bookstores in the greater Seattle area hold key roles in the social lives of individuals by acting as a central gathering spot and by providing a sense of community and a sense of rootedness within the community.

A Brief Genealogy of Modern Day Bookstores

Bookstores have a long history⁷ as gathering places and social spaces within which community can be located. As they have come play both meaningful and material roles in the lives of their communities, so have they also been elevated to occupy a symbolic role in the discourses surrounding them. Indeed, organizational ethnographer Ryan Raffaelli observes that as early as the first half of the 18th century bookstores began hosting reading groups. These reading groups quickly turned bookstores into places within which ideas could be exchanged, debated, and formulated

⁷ For a more in depth look at bookselling in America, see Laura Miller's work *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption* and Anderson's *Bookselling in America and the Word*, "written in celebration of the 75th Anniversary of the American Booksellers Association"

(Raffaelli in conversation with Neely-Cohen 2018). Thus, the earliest bookstores quickly became social hubs, a quality which is remains characteristic of bookstores today.

That said, bookselling predates brick and mortar bookstores resembling those we see today by a good thousand or so years, give or take a century. The earliest booksellers were scribes who crafted their volumes by hand and on demand. Bookselling increased to meet the demand that emerged in response to the first libraries, the earliest of which include the Library at Alexandria, dating back to 300 BCE. The spread of Christianity similarly saw an increase demand for printed religious works (Stallard 1999). The demand for books, often to furnish private and academic libraries, existed almost exclusively among the elites of the time, nobility and the rare wealthy merchant who could afford such luxuries. However, bookselling as a distinct trade developed in the 12th century in response to the demand of universities and lawyers for printed works in Paris and Bologna (Stallard 1999).

The advent of a more modern form of bookselling, characterized by a separation of publishers and booksellers, developed following the invention of the printing press, though the extent of this separation varied at times (Stallard 1999). Benedict Anderson characterizes the books as the “first modern-style mass-produced industrial commodity...The book, [unlike other commodities such as sugar], however - and here it prefigures the durables of our time - is a distinct, self contained object, exactly reproduced on a large scale...each book has its own eremitic self sufficiency” (2006, 50). Anderson characterizes the printing press as a key component in the historical development of nationalism, which produced printed materials which both reflected the times and challenged existing powers, including the Catholic Church, demonstrating the historical power and importance of printed mediums (2006, 39).

The Early Growth and Proliferation of Bookstores in the United States:

It might be said that bookselling for colonial settlers in North America was a haphazard affair; the distribution of books and consequently access to them was inconsistent. Books were often printed and distributed by the same individual. Others have argued that from the mid 1600s up until the early 1800s, the majority of books in British colonized North America were printed in London before being shipped to the 'New' World (Arndt 2011). Later, following the American Revolutionary War, books were peddled across the United States. But before and after the Revolutionary War, the majority of books were available only in large cities, like Baltimore. By the Civil War, the book trade in the United States of America had largely been separated into three arenas, that of printing, publishing, and selling. This marked separation remains a defining characteristic of the book industry in the United States today (Miller 2006).

When the American Company of Booksellers which was founded in 1802 retail bookstores did not exist in the form they do today, which is to say most 'bookstores' at the time operated alongside book publishing, often in the same building, effectively functioning as a single business (Miller 2006). Most bookstores now, and for the last century and a half, have functioned as businesses, separate from their suppliers, the publishers. Though the American Company of Booksellers was short lived, lasting only four years, the American Company of Booksellers predated the American Booksellers Association, which was founded in 1900, by almost a century (Anderson 2006, 11). The American Company of Booksellers and the smaller regional associations which existed before it, have all faced difficulties in representing their members, who have historically tended to resist any attempts to standardize their practices or otherwise control or oversee the work of booksellers.

Rise of Big Box/Chain Bookstores and Amazon

The first chain bookstores in the United States, Waldenbooks, opened their first store in 1962 and B. Dalton Books opened in 1966. These two book retailers, which closed in 2011 and 2013 respectively, quickly expanded their stores and were joined by other bookstore chains, or big box bookstores, including Barnes & Noble and Borders, the latter closed in 2011. The threat chain stores seemed to pose was exacerbated in the mid 1970s as the practice of discounting among big box chains, which had hitherto been largely limited to nonbook retailers.

By the 1980's, the threat of chain bookstores was at its peak (Miller 2006). However independent bookstores, through the American Booksellers Association (ABA), dealt a blow of their own to chain bookstores in 1997 when the ABA won a 25 million dollar settlement in its dispute with Penguin. The ABA contended that certain publishers were giving discounts to chain book retailers, discriminating against independent stores. Penguin settled and the ABA distributed 12.5 million dollars of the settlement money to its members based on each store's 1996 purchases from Penguin (Carvajal 1997). The source of these disputes however, which Miller refers to as an "ongoing war between independent booksellers and the national chain bookstores," dates back much earlier to controversies over the bookselling taking place in department stores, over a century ago (Miller 2006, 3). Miller asserts that at the core of disputes over discounting books is "the chain-independent struggle over whose version of book culture should prevail. For independents, the undiscounted⁸ prices at which they sell books to the public represent all those extras- the personalized relations, the commitment to diversity, the sensitivity to local needs- that they believe cannot be reduced to

⁸ Independent bookstores frequently offer discounts and rewards programs. An example of this is the Harvard Bookstore in Boston which offers a 20% discount each week on the best selling books in the store. The Harvard Bookstore, like many others, also offers a 'frequent buyer' program.

market valuation” (156). The dispute over discounting in the book industry is not, as Miller suggests, only about “book culture,” and independent versus chain/big box stores, but also about the survival of physical bookstores in the context of online competition. Retired independent bookstore owner Mickey described this phenomenon, explaining that

“Everybody knew, quote unquote, that independent bookstores were a dying breed. Starting in the mid 80s...early 80s, and you know there’s all the other big box stores and everybody was selling books and everybody was starting to sell them at a discount. And so then it came Amazon and Amazon was going to kill everybody...kill every industry out there, if people aren’t scared, they should be.”

Here Mickey voices the fear that Amazon will not only replace independent bookstores but other physical shops, such as grocery stores, as well. Of the eight booksellers who brought up concerns about Amazon in their interviews, each one iterated, like Mickey, that they feared not just the homogenization or death of bookstores, but a broader loss of physical spaces in which they could gather and connect with their locality.

1995 was in some ways a turning point for the bookselling industry in the United States: the number of independent bookstores the American Booksellers Association reported in the United States that year marked a historical high while Amazon launched its website, Amazon.com (Raffaelli 2017). By 2000, the number of independent bookstores in the United States had dropped by 43 percent (Raffaelli 2017, 3). Some predicted the end of brick and mortar bookstores. In order to provide drastically low prices on certain books, Amazon must take a loss on those sales, with the hope that the losses will be offset by the volume of customers it brings in. Within the book industry, “the image of the perpetual bargain,” which was strengthened by Internet bookselling, where

the fiercest price wars were carried out, often led by Amazon. Amazon and Barnesandnoble.com were willing to lose money on deeply discounted titles in order to gain market share, and their strategy was to publicize special deals exclusively” (Miller 2006, 148). This sort of pricing is not something independent bookstores are able to do because publishers set the prices of the books and the profit margins that bookstores make on each book. The industry average of a forty five percent profit margin on each book does not solely represent what Miller calls “extras.” Rather the margin covers everything that keeps a bookstore running, from staff wages and rent to healthcare and utilities. Bookstores, like most other local businesses, find it challenging if not impossible to match the prices of Amazon and other large big box/chain stores. As Meredith, now a bookseller for over twenty years, explained why she prefers to shop locally, she noted that “I don’t like Amazon because it...was created to drive out bookstores and then it decided to drive out everything else. I just think [of] communities, it drives me nuts to think of being at home and shopping at home and not connecting with people.” Almost twenty five years after Amazon was founded, Mickey’s continued view of Amazon as a threat to independent bookstores and other social spaces is a common one among booksellers.

However, contrary to initial predictions of the impending doom facing independent bookstores, the number of bookstores in the United States increased by 35 percent from 1,651 in 2009 to 2,227 in 2015 and are continuing to grow. What Raffaelli describes as the ‘resurgence of independent bookstores’ first started as sort of social movement. Indeed, during this period of growth of independent bookstores in the United States, buy local movements, or localism⁹, have also become more popular (Kurland et al 2012). Raffaelli argues that this social movement was a

⁹ I am following the definition of localism as “a movement to encourage consumers and businesses to purchase from locally owned, independent businesses rather than national corporations,” (Kurland et al 2012, 45).

moralized and politicized movement to promote the survival of independent bookstores following the advent of big box bookstores and later Amazon in which “independent booksellers began to mobilize around shared collective identity claims associated with “localism” ...creating a movement that attached normative values with their economic interests...[forming alliances] to preserve distinct local “community” values that were shared in common” (Raffaelli 2017, 5). Raffaelli (2017) argues that booksellers also placed an increased emphasis on the characteristics which they felt helped set them apart from chain stores, hosting more in-store events and author signings, showcasing their staff book recommendations and locally curated inventory, which I will discuss at greater length in Chapter Two.

Laura J. Miller and Robert Raffaelli have both documented how this decline and subsequent rise of independent bookstores occurred, the business practices utilized and community and social movements which enabled the resurgence of independent bookstores. Raffaelli and Miller argue that the resurgence of independent bookstores in the United States was facilitated by reframing independent bookstores as moral goods and vital community gathering spots. Raffaelli adds to this social movements like the push to shop local, unique practices like personal recommendations, referred to as the ‘Three Cs: community, curation, and convening,’ along with the American Booksellers Association mobilization of collective identity.

Resistance from Within: the American Booksellers Association

Historically, the process of organizing bookstores under the American Booksellers Association has been quite complex. This complexity of uniting independent bookstores was expressed during the ABA Town Hall and Annual Membership meeting at the ABA’s 2018

BookExpo America, held in New York. In my interview, one board member stated that “as a united force we can bring each other up to the next level” but that this was complicated because “we are all independent,” referring to the historical tension booksellers have struggled with as they continue to strive for independence from potential ABA control while maintaining their membership with the American Booksellers Association.

The resistance of the owners of independent bookstores in the United States to many of the American Booksellers Association, which store owners feared might attempt to control or regulate them, reflects the historically held conviction within the book trade, and especially among independent bookstores, that they play a vital role in the ensuring of free speech, fostering new ideas and debates, and increasing literacy. Wright himself observes this, noting that “the production, trade and consumption of books has long been implicit in a variety of ideological and class struggles, though these are as likely to be understood through Enlightenment narratives about struggles for freedom and citizenship” (113). Many independent bookstore members of the ABA resent anything which they feel infringes on their autonomous functioning, fearing that such interference would come to impede the free exchange of ideas and speech. Another long-time bookstore owner I talked to, Mickey, expanded on this, saying that “they’re independent bookstores and they want to be independent. Historically, they don’t want the ABA telling them what to do. They don’t want the ABA or anyone else telling them to ‘let’s just work together.’” One board member, talking about the united power of independent bookstores, asked that his listeners “look at the Parkland students, that’s what we’re doing.” Though this is a comparison made in arguably poor taste, and not one that I myself make, it does raise an important point about how independent bookstores view their collective action and their capacity to organize as historically powerful. As I discuss further in

Chapter Three, some booksellers at independent bookstores see their workplaces not just as “liberal bastions,” in Thomas’s words, but also the protectors of free expression, as bastions of free speech even, capable of mobilizing to promote positive change.

Key to the concept of mobilization with the American Booksellers Association is the concept of community. Following the idea of Kuecker et al (2010) that “community must be seen as a dynamic process of constant formation in which good outcomes cannot be guaranteed...[and] should be combined with a focus on inclusiveness as a necessary orientation to avoid unnecessary division,” I suggest that there is some level of community among booksellers, especially independent ones, and within the larger book industry (250).

I would argue against including booksellers at big box bookstores, though they certainly form relationships with publishers and other industry players because they are not members of the American Booksellers Association and tend to be viewed rather unfavorably and as competitors by other bookstores. This precludes the inter-bookstore comradery of many independent bookstores, especially within the greater Seattle Area. Indeed, approximately half of the booksellers I spoke with brought up Amazon, and all who did so spoke about Amazon in an overall negative way. This is not to say that Amazon is universally disliked among booksellers. However, independent booksellers conceptualize themselves and their community as separate and even in opposition to big box/chain bookstores. Even though big box/chain bookstores might be seen as an opponent, they are not necessarily viewed in a negative light by independent booksellers. Mickey in particular is quite interested in Amazon’s approach to bookselling, saying that “just like the chain stores made independent bookstores better, Amazon made [independent bookstores] better, competition is a good thing.” Kuecker et al further argue that “the ultimate test of inclusiveness might be the

capacity of a particular conception of community to mobilize people to defend what they hold in common” (250). Independent booksellers have indeed demonstrated significant ability to mobilize as a collective and community through the umbrella organization of the ABA as they did when the ABA won 25 million dollars in its 1997 settlement with Penguin.

Independent bookstores in the greater Seattle area also demonstrate their collaboration annually with the Seattle Indie Bookstore Day, part of the national Independent Bookstore Day which has been celebrated on the last Saturday in April (this year April 27th) since 2015. In 2018 nineteen stores with twenty-three locations between them, in and around Seattle participated. The goal is to visit every store on the list to earn a 25 percent discount at all the stores for an entire year. In 2018 over five-hundred people completed the challenge, a significant increase from the forty-two that finished in the event’s first year, 2015. The official webpage for the Seattle Independent Bookstore Day states that each year “Seattle’s indie bookstores [have] collaborated to showcase what we do best: build human connections through physical books¹⁰.” In the following section I will discuss the experience of four individuals who have at times found ‘human connections’ within bookstores and through books.

Locating Community

Defining Community: Complex, Contradictory, and More Than a Little Confusing

There is a history of ternary conceptualizations of space, perhaps most notably led by Henri Lefebvre and shared by Michel de Certeau. Following this tradition, space, and especially social space, which rely on cognitive and physical construction, is herein defined following this three-part

¹⁰ www.seattlebookstoreday.com

model, space can be conceptualized through “spatial practice; representations of space; and spaces of representation. Space is viewed in three ways, as perceived, conceived and lived” (Elden 2007, 111). This is to say that there is the physical space which is utilized and created, the space as it is imagined, and the space that, over time and usage, becomes symbolic, it is “the space of *connaissance* (less formal or more local forms of knowledge), space as real-and-imagined” (Elden 2007, 111). Social space in particular, following Nisbett’s analysis of Massey, is “the unshaped social potentiality of a particular location, and place as its fully formed counterpart, bound up in the social relations of multiple identities...*of that particular time*” (Nisbett 2006, 129). It is this conception of social space that I employ here.

Community as it is commonly invoked, can be of different types and exist at different levels: the business community or the Asian American community and so on. However, as Mason notes, this conception of community is “fundamentally ambiguous,” with, he suggests, two common understandings, the ‘ordinary concept of community’ and the ‘moral concept of community’ (Mason 2000, 4). He suggests that the ‘ordinary view’ sees community as “constituted by a group of people who share a range of values, a way of life, identify with the group and its practices and recognize each other as members of that group” (21).

Groups, of which race and nationality are often examples, are not naturally occurring phenomena waiting to be identified, discovered, or catalogued. Rather, as Edward Said notes, “the group is not a natural or God-given entity but is a constructed, manufactured, even, in some cases, invented object, with a history of struggle and conquest behind it” (Said cited in Massey 1994, 6). Communities are such groups, they are built, conceptualized, enacted, and at times highly contested or contestable designations. The community of Klickitat, historically formed, negotiated, and

asserted, is no exception. The boundaries of community on Klickitat are perhaps more easily and obviously associated with geography due to the containment and separation which are functions of its geographic location, which create a physically bounded city.

Community, as it is more colloquially employed, is often used in a more geographical sense to describe groups of humans living within a bounded time and space. Alternatively, Halperin proposes that “a community is not a geographical place, but a process and a series of everyday practices engaged in by people who have or have had some link to,” a place or location (Halperin 1998, cited in Williams 2010, 344). I agree with the general assertion that ‘community’ is fluid and variable in its usage but that as Williams argues, “No matter what kind of community a community is, it is always a claim, a fiction, inscribed through symbols, ceremony, food, or a set of practices. It is almost always a site of disengagement and struggle as well as attachment and belonging” (348). Indeed, among booksellers, the term ‘community’ is utilized almost exclusively to connote a positive message, often referring to a geographic locale (Miller 1999; Anderson 2006).

In this vein, independent bookstores are often spoken of as the archetypal ‘third places’ within the life of an individual. Ray Oldenburg’s concept of ‘third places’ describes spaces other than work (or school) or home that one goes to socialize, they are “places where people gather *primarily* to enjoy each other’s company” (Oldenburg 1982, 269). Jack and Thomas both brought up the idea of bookstores as third places. As Moira, Lisa, Susa, and Janie all recounted, their local bookstores have acted as gathering spaces at various points in the lives of each of them. Booksellers themselves point out their stores’ significance within their communities, especially as gathering places that are trusted and respected. Independent bookstores are, in the words of Mickey, the retired owner of a small-town bookstore on Puget Sound, “a place that people trust, people respect. And I say people,

this is not all people, there's people who don't care, people who don't get it, people who think they're too liberal, they're too highbrow, they're too nose in the air... [but] they're the community gathering place, there's the trust" Though he is speaking of bookstores a community spaces, Mickey makes the important observation that not everyone feels included in these spaces. Hall states that "the regular participation in less official public spaces where more informal memberships are able to develop is therefore primary to the formation of alternative publics" (2012, 6). Bookstores in this sense can be seen as 'alternative publics,' as they are indeed open to the public. However, this is not to say that bookstores, because they are, to an extent, public spaces, are not also private businesses and, as such, have some exclusionary characteristics. Indeed, as Hall observes, "social spaces inevitably reveal extents of allegiance and division. In Nick Caff the notion of exclusion was not simply clarified by who socialised in the space; who was there and who was absent" (2012, 65). Indeed, one bookseller, Mickey, pointed out this very contradiction to me, explaining that "I'm working at a bookstore with people that are just like me, they're white, middle class, upper middle class, they're well educated, liberal, I mean how fun is that- and how much of a bubble is that? Also lets just remind ourselves."

Comfort, Coziness, and Community: The Experience of Bookstore Visitors in Klickitat, WA

For this chapter, I sought out additional interviews with a few bookstore customers. I ended up speaking with four women, all in their mid-fifties to sixties, white, college educated, who each described themselves as voracious readers. Each spoke fondly of their local bookshop, Black Bird Books, which is located in the small town of Klickitat, Washington, aspects of which I have

fictionalized to maintain the confidentiality of my interlocutors. The characteristics of Klickitat which I describe in this chapter are drawn from real towns in the Puget Sound area.

Located on the main street in the tiny downtown Klickitat, Black Bird books is settled between a local bakery and a small art gallery. The well-lit space features a variety of mostly new books, comfortably nestled in the towering bookshelves which, as is common in bookstores, could be pushed against the walls to accommodate events. Downtown Klickitat is not much different from many of the other small towns situated around Puget Sound, features several small businesses including a bank or two, local restaurants and clothing shops, and a grocery store, by far the largest establishment in the town. If one were so inclined, it would take no more than fifteen minutes to walk from one end to the other of Main Street. Like any other town in Western Washington, the rain low hanging clouds are near constant features during the winter. Many of Klickitat's 25,000 residents commute to work in Seattle during the week. Somewhat isolated from Seattle and the surrounding towns by local geography, Klickitat requires a fifty minute commute for those who work in the city, or even just for anyone looking to visit a mall or a Trader Joe's.

Lisa, a divorcee with two adult sons, grew up in Washington state and works in landscape design. Susan, who is now semi-retired, has a master's in psychology and works with elementary school children. She also grew up in Washington State, spent some time living in Northern California, and is married with three adult daughters. Janie, who grew up in California, has a master's in environmental education and works with a local interior design company. After fourteen years of living in Seattle, Janie moved to Klickitat three years ago. Moira, who grew up and went to college in the Seattle area, has three children, and co-owned a small independent bookstore, Madrona books, with her late husband. Before her husband passed, they sold the bookstore and moved to Klickitat.

Moira's oldest son now works at Black Bird Books. Moira, Susan, and Lisa have each spent twenty or more years living in Klickitat.

Lisa and Susan recalled frequent visits to Black Bird Books with their children when they were young. Lisa especially emphasized how comfortable she felt in this bookstore, so much so that she described how, when her two sons were relatively young, she would allow them to browse in the children's section in the back of the store while she spent time looking at books for herself a few sections over: "in [Black Bird Books] I knew exactly where they were and that was just perfect for a mom with kids to also look for some stuff that she liked." Lisa was emphatic that this was not something she would have considered doing at the local library, which houses most of its children books on the top floor and adult books on the bottom, let alone a larger bookstore like Barnes and Noble: "there was zero chance in a Barnes and Noble that I would leave [my sons] in the kid's section because no one knew me or them." For Lisa, trips to Black Bird Books were treated as family outings in a space she felt safe and comfortable in, with something to appeal to each of her family members. Though Susan also allowed two of her three children to stay in the Children's Section while she perused the store, she acknowledged that, with one daughter with special needs it was different, "there's certain places you choose to go and stay or not stay that long, and [the bookstore] was good for Grace [my daughter], it was safe but we could only stay so long."

Moira and Lisa both reminisced about the party Black Bird Books held each year for the release of each Harry Potter book, which they attended each year with their children. Lisa described this, saying that the bookstore "turned out to be a great community spot. We were a part of that whole generation [who waited with all our neighbors] at the bookstore for the next Harry Potter book to come out...[it was] just magic." Black Bird Books was by no means alone in hosting these

release parties. Indeed, I remember from my own childhood the excitement of lining up in my dad's bookstore with my sisters, dressed in my Harry Potter costume, and waiting with baited breath until Midnight when we could get our hands on the next Harry Potter book. Moira described the event in Klickitat, saying that it was "a major event for the community, hundreds of people lined up...people would just sit on the floor [of the bookstore] reading."

Lisa, Moira, and Susan now visit Black Bird Books far less frequently than they did when their children were young. Moira and Lisa reflected, this is at least in part because, after their marriages ended, they simply had less money to spend on things like books. Lisa explained that, "now I'm divorced and I'm on a budget I don't buy books, they're too expensive [but] I'm constantly frustrated because the books I do want to read are never available [at the library], even when I used to go on my own [without my children], I never got the book I went into get [at the library] because they were never there. When I went to the bookstore I got to buy everything I wanted which was really fun...[It's] what you choose to spend money on." Though Susan, who also has adult children, never divorced, she also credited a shift in her financial situation for the decline in time she spends at Black Bird Books. Financial changes were not, however, the only factors which saw each of these women spending less time and money on books. Moira and Susan also reported less desire to own books than they had once felt, as Susan said, "I love books but I don't really love to own them anymore, I don't have space." Both Susan and Lisa have instead turned to the library for reading material, much of which Lisa downloads to her iPad through her local library's app. Though both Lisa and Susan now get most of the books they read from their local library, each took issue with various aspects of it. Lisa bemoaned the long waiting lists for many of the books she

would like to read, “the problem is that I’m number fifty-six on the list and by the time I read it, its three years past publishing.”

Janie also gets most of her books from the library, because “I know it’s free, I don’t have a lot of disposable income in my current state. But the library only has what it has...I think I’m a binge buyer though – sometimes I’ll have to say I can’t stand it anymore and say I have to go to the bookstore and buy like ten books [at once].” On the other hand, Moira reported that before she married, she got most of her books from the library but once she bought Madrona Books with her late husband, they got “such good discounts, it’s insane so I just bought books but now I’m at point where I’m fortunate that I have [a son] working at a bookstore so I can get a discount...Maybe when [he stops working there] I’ll get more from the library.” Moira, like Susan and Lisa, stated that she also gets many books from family and friends, “we just pass them between us.”

My family is certainly no exception to this. Even with what could kindly be called an overabundance of books by some and perhaps a borderline hoarding situation by others, when it comes to books, we still share what we are reading, creating waitlists for particularly desirable books. Luckily for me my mom received a copy of Michelle Obama’s new memoir for Christmas, otherwise I would be waiting for first my step mom, then my dad to finish it, after which it would be given to our close family friend down the street who would then send it on to another friend a few towns over. And though I have access to an excellent library and interlibrary loan system through my college, I nonetheless wait for my sister to finish whatever she happens to be reading at the time and send it to me in a care package at school. These books provide and maintain connections within my family. They are something we discuss, debate, and bond over. Indeed, books as objects can hold immense sentimental value, evoking memories and feelings far beyond the words within them.

When my grandmother passed away I had great difficulty with the idea that, as a family, we would not be keeping the entirety of her vast book collection, which including everything from highly valuable leather bound antiques to the latest photograph collections of animals. Consequently I ended up with approximately one old travel trunk worth of books, a very small portion of the collection, I am not quite sure what to do with even now.

Just as the frequency of her bookstore visits have ebbed and flowed over time, Lisa noted that her reading habits have too. Though she occasionally read for pleasure in high school, it wasn't until sometime after she graduated college and started her family that she began spending more time reading: "I know that college kept me from reading [for pleasure] ... [and] it was more as I settled into having kids and was home that I started to have time and energy to read because before that I was working until 11 pm on my job and in school." Moira, Susan, and Janie on the other hand reported that they have always read a great deal, though the topics varied with what places they were in life. Moira explained that when she was having children she read extensively about child rearing and nutrition, not to mention the countless children and young adult books she read out loud to her kids.

Though Moira, Susan, and Lisa all now spend less time at Black Bird Books, the store nonetheless holds great importance to each. As Susan described Black Bird Books, she repeatedly referred to it as 'homier' than the local library, "while I love that libraries are providing books for free they also tend to be more sterile and... [Black Bird Books is] just homier I guess, I keep using that word because I've lived here 25 years and I just feel so at home at the bookstore." Lisa recalled her annual Christmas Eve tradition, whereby, after completing all her other shopping, her last stop would always be Black Bird Books.

“I always planned to spend that last minute at the bookstore, it’s a really nice and has those wood floors, its super cozy, not like a Barnes & Noble which is large and airy and doesn’t have the same feeling. [Black Bird Books] always felt like a good place for me to wind down and see [the store owner], he’s a good buddy of mine and that was always my last stop. They would wrap stuff and everyone would chat and it was lovely.”

For Lisa, Black Bird Books more than just a shop, it became a gathering place in which she found comfort and company: “it became a collective in a way, there were other moms with their kids and...it was my favorite place to go on Christmas Eve.” This fits with Lisa’s definition of community as a shared space in which you can run into people you know who share interests. For Lisa, the local bookstore became a place she looked forward to visiting, a place to catch up with friends. Susan, Moira, and Janie each echoed this in their own way, but acknowledge that there are different types of communities, some with a geographic component.

Each woman, in addition to speaking of communities distinguished by shared values, spoke in terms of a local community, the community of Klickitat, Washington. They both found community in their local bookshop and saw the bookstore as rooted in the geographically defined community of Klickitat. Speaking of the independent bookstores she frequented while living in Seattle, Janie explained that “they are creating a sense of neighborhood in the bookstore, supporting local authors and book clubs. [It’s a] mutual relationship...and people of the community buy in, its mutually supportive.”As indicated by the various different ways in which Susan, Moira, J, and Lisa conceptualized it, the term ‘community’ is elusive, contested, and at times problematic in its exclusivity.

Tensions of Community and Exclusion

As booksellers at the ABA's Town Hall Meeting discussed the community value of stores like theirs, one bookseller expressed dissatisfaction one impact opening a bookstore in some communities tend to have: gentrification, which acts as a form of exclusion. By pushing lower income residents out of an area, gentrification works to exclude them from the new developments. In describing bookstores as "harbingers of gentrification" this bookseller called for more awareness of the issue, pointing out that "basic access to books is very difficult for large areas...opening bookstores can be perceived as aggressive and bookstores need to help provide food and jobs, [they] need to help keep [jobs] rather than replace them." This form of exclusion is not dissimilar to Moira, Susan, Lisa, and Jeanie's discussion of the limits placed on their participation in their local bookstores by their own financial situations. The inability to afford books the women experienced at different points in their lives, like gentrification which forces people to move away from a bookstore, highlight the financial exclusion created by locating community within a bookstore.

On the other hand, another member of the American Booksellers Association pointed to the "unique role [of bookstores] in helping customers find books" and the unique relationship they have with communities as reason that large corporations should "not be able to leverage outside clout and influence to decimate communities." He went on to say that the ABA needs to "ensure stores reflect diversity of their communities" and that "stores should be comfortable and open places for everyone." These comments help to expose some of the tensions within the bookselling business: while bookstores, and independent bookstores especially, claim to offer a community value, there is

always the implicit question of *which people* are included in ‘community’ and what might it mean to locate community in a private business. Janie noted one of potential limitations herself, saying that “sometimes I don’t feel like I can’t spend that much time browsing in a bookstore if I can’t buy anything.”

Exclusion happens because of the bookstore’s ambiguous role as a public space, not just a social space. I experienced some of this very tension during a recent visit to an independent bookstore in Los Angeles. This bookstore, hereafter called Los Angeles X Bookstore, is what may be referred to as a ‘quasi-public’ space: it could “be made available selectively to tourists and white-collar workers while being denied to vagrants and other unsuitable” (Davis 1992, 163). The store seemed to promote an egalitarian policy welcoming all persons so long as they complied with the rules: if they left their bags at the check they were welcome, and as I was told by a staff member, if they harassed staff members or other customers, they were not. However, in practice, the effect of the Los Angeles X Bookstore’s policies and space worked to subtly discourage certain types of customers: the lack of restrooms avoided what otherwise might be a draw for homeless, the bag check policy impeded the entrance of homeless and others with large quantities of personal belongings they could not leave behind the desk or unintended: From a second story window overlooking the street below the Los Angeles X Bookstore, I observed two people who appeared to be homeless sitting on a bus stop bench next to a shopping cart of their belongings¹¹. Though this store may be a more extreme case than others, the contradiction of a space which promotes itself as *open* while also being *closed* to some by creating barriers which limit access, is by no means unique to this bookstore. This is something that most private businesses, bookstores included, exhibit to

¹¹ Observation made during project conducted in Fall 2018 for Ethnographic Tales of the City course.

varying degrees. Independent bookstores serving as social spaces wherein community is engaged in, are not exempt from Carbonella's observation that "community cultural traditions and institutions that celebrate localism are contradictory; expressing and reinforcing an isolation also highlights the fact that they are caught up in larger hegemonic projects" (Carbonella 1992 cited in Williams 2010, 349).

Though I certainly saw no bookstore in the Seattle area with anything close to Los Angeles X Bookstore's level of physical control and exclusion, exclusion can and does still occur. Though they act as social spaces for many, as Lisa, Susan, Janie, and Moira all noted, they were less likely to spend time at the local bookstore when they were not financially able to buy books. Exclusion is not found only in the capitalist model of the bookstore as a *store*, but also in who feels welcome within it. Exclusion, like community is multifaceted, even in bookstores, which I will discuss further in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER TWO: The Political Mediation of Space and Knowledge within Bookstores

“Buying inventory is not a neutral job, you are making a judgement and your biases are going to creep in either intentionally or otherwise...but I will come across books whos topics are important but i feel like if I only bring in one or two they'll get lost back in a sections so i'll bring in a larger quantity than maybe I should just so that they have a chance to be upfront and people will look at them. [This year I brought in] stuff on feminist theory [but] because it'll get lost in Women Studies...[I display] it on the front table so maybe it'll sell...it is part of the decision process is what do I want to put up front for people to see.” (Thomas)

Bookstores are spaces within which knowledge is curated and transmitted. This is not a neutral process, as Thomas noted. The countless actions and decisions which determine the purchasing, placement, and sale of each individual book is in some way making a statement of value. Schwartz et al. (2013) argues that “personal values underlie an give coherence to political values” (899).

Extending this argument, I suggest that expressions or statement of personal values are in and of themselves political. These political statements of value are are repeated with every instance individual exercise of agency booksellers enact throughout the store. For instance in the quote above Thomas, a manager and buyer at a Seattle area bookstore, describes how the process of selecting inventory and displaying books reflects his personal values and interests, in this case feminist theory. In this way independent bookstores are not only politically engaged businesses but also highly curated, politically charged spaces, spaces in which everything from the orientation of books on the

shelf to staff recommendations reflect booksellers' individual agency. This agency renders the space political.

By examining the collective participation of staff in the curation of in the bookstore space, in this chapter I will argue that this mediation of space creates and transmits meanings, reflecting the personal preferences, values, and identities of its curators, the bookstore workers and that these values are political. I will discuss two main themes. First I will examine how personal expressions of agency are reflected in the space of the bookstore, politicizing it. Second I will consider how curation of the store's inventory reflects not only the personal values of managers and owners, but also the area in which the bookstore is located. First though I will provide some brief context for the discussion of the politics of space and of bookselling as symbolic and thus political.

Contextualizing the Meanings of Books and Space

Space is Political

The curated selection and display of books in the space create and convey a series of messages, embodying the interactions of the curators, booksellers, with the artifacts and, through the artifacts, with their authors and creative production including publishers, editors, and so on. These messages and relationships are readily accessible, they are to be picked up and read, purchased and perused, leafed through and walked among. In other words, the bookstore is a conglomeration of social and material interactions between booksellers, customers, authors, artifacts, and the space itself. Walking into this space is walking into a web of meaning of the space and held within it. The meanings within these complex interactions are always personal and often political, holding both intentional and unintentional manifestations of values, interests, and individual identity. In this

sense, the space is not merely physical, but social, and as Lefebvre (1956) suggests, always political. Drawing on Lefebvre's work, Elden explains that space is political because it "has been shaped and molded by historical and natural elements, through a political process. Space is a social and political product," as are the meanings it holds (Elden 2007, 107). Independent bookstores, are especially molded through these processes. Indeed, the arrangement and selection of displays within independent bookstores, often chosen or compiled by booksellers, can be and often is used to convey messages or values.

Symbolic Meanings of Books

The historical discourse and conceptualizations of the book trade as somehow special or unique, especially among those with some involvement in it, is part of the political process which has shaped meanings of and within bookstores spaces. Following Stallard's discussion of the cultural power of the book I will also allow "the book to stand as a general representative of 'print culture' and/or the emergence of reading" (1999, 13) in my own examination of the particular symbolic powers bookstores hold as the vendors of books(13). This symbolic power, which Stallard calls 'cultural power,' is encapsulated in Bourdieu's observations regarding certain religious texts:

"The dual nature, theological and magical, of the hagiographic book made it a sacred object that one could manipulate. Like a cult object, it could be possessed in common and be endowed with sacred power, but like devotional materials, it was an individual continuation of cultic activities and the mark of a religious practice. it took its place among medals, pious images, and pilgrimage tokens. It signaled, recalled, evoked a vow or a past or ongoing practice." (18)

This near mystical nature Bourdieu observes in hagiographic books, I maintain also extends to non-religious books and books more generally. Meaningful and magical, books are malleable in meaning and possession, the knowledge within them, especially stories, can simultaneously be held by many and hold particular personal meaning. The book can in this sense, be aligned “with other objects of totemic or symbolic value” (Stallard 1999, 11).

Wright suggests that the roles often considered to be filled by books, of spreading knowledge and understanding, or of educating in general, are highly esteemed in general and serves to elevate the book industry overall. This is not an apolitical phenomenon. This pattern of conceptualizing the production and process of the book trade as an actor in different political and social struggles supports the claim that the book trade is often a politically charged, or at least involved, industry. Independent bookstore, my primary focus in this project, are of course just one aspect of the book industry. This is in no small part due to the objects in which it deals: books. This is exemplified by the repeated suggestion that books are important “democratizing, liberating forces” (Winner 1980, 122). Mickey, the long-time owner of an independent bookstore, now retired, echoed this sentiment, saying that:

“I think that books are a cornerstone of democracy and getting books out into the world and keeping them out in the world, and available to everybody, is critical to everybody. These days fake news is harder to promulgate in a published, in a book. Certainly, its being done and it will be done but once you put your name on there as an author... it’s very different from news on the internet or on the radio, its permanent, its different. I think books are a way to battle fake news...”

Mickey's perspective, which conceptualizes the book as a democratic fundamental, supports Wrights' discussion of the involvement of the book trade in different struggles. Of further interest, Mickey's assertion of the power books hold in the promotion of democratic values¹², bears striking resemblance to Toynbee's idea of books as ambassadors:

“Books are after all the best ambassadors and interpreters. And the booksellers are the couriers of these ambassadors. So long as books can circulate more or less freely all over the world, it does remain possible for the different peoples of the world to increase their understanding of each other. Now that is the objective of first class importance in the human race of our time, because it is necessary to grow into something like a single family. So the international booktrade is one of the best antidotes to isolation and therefore one of the most important safeguards against suicide.” (Toynbee 185).

Whether or not you agree with this rather outdated perspective promoting increased homogeneity of humanity as the ultimate goal¹³, Toynbee nonetheless raises an important point regarding the meaning and value books hold for different people. Toynbee explicitly sees books as vital players furthering humanity to a superior place of mutual understanding and, in theory, comfortable coexistence. Mickey also sees books as vital purveyors of information and understanding in an increasingly confusing and digitalized age in which it is becoming more difficult to differentiate between fact and fiction. For Mickey, traditionally published books, which must undergo at least some level of scrutiny before their release, provide a level of security lost in the far less regulated and exponentially faster paced world of online information.

¹² I do not mean to suggest that these democratic values are universally applicable or 'good,' but do acknowledge that, as the term is invoked in these quotes, it is certainly meant to be.

¹³ Personally this is far too reminiscent of Victorian Social Evolutionary Theory's linear and highly Western-centric understanding of human development.

Similarly, Thomas also spoke of the vital role of books in exposing people to different perspectives. In speaking of bookstores as third places, Thomas added that not only is the bookstore where he works a gathering place, but also a place where people come for information. “I think bookstores fill that function and a lot of bookstore owners latch onto that as the core, as yes we want to sell a lot of books but the reason for moving books is to provide information and to be a place where people come to for information in one form or another.” With inventories that are, by the necessary limitations of space and demand, highly curated, bookstores and other physical collections of books such as libraries, add an additional layer of comfort and legitimacy regarding the quality of their goods.

Personal Expressions of Agency in Bookselling

The physical space and selection and arrangement of books within independent bookstores is meticulous and meaningful, the contents and displays highly curated. In this section I argue that through shelving and ‘staff recs’¹⁴, booksellers, predominantly non-management employees but sometimes management as well, participate in this curation, exercising personal agency and expressing personal values and identities which are physically manifested in the bookstore space. These expressions of personal values and identities is political (Schwartz et al. 2013).

A Day of Shelving

¹⁴ I use the designation ‘staff recs’ as opposed to recommendations, bookseller recommendations, or staff recommendations, to differentiate between the books for which staff members write recommendations which are then displayed as ‘staff recs’ from the individualized book recommendations booksellers make as they assist individual customers.

The day I realized I was supposed to do inventory checks of each of the genre sections I stocked at East Coast Books I knew I would do the Economics section first. At the information desk by the entrance to the high ceilinged, brightly lit store I printed an alphabetically ordered list of all the books that are supposed to be in the section, and got to work. Stepping around the desk I walked past the summer reading display and smiled, most of the books on this display were queer fiction recommended by my coworkers. I loved that this display was so visible, almost everyone who entered the store walked past it on their way to the check out desk, located beside the information desk. As I walked to the Economics section I passed the the Fiction display, the glossy hardbacks with artful lettering in vibrant colors, laid out face up on the table like cozy rows of sunbathers, always seemed to draw me in. Before I turned the corner I glanced at the staff recommendations display with the neat little note card right by the front door. I noticed that there was only one copy left of *Julián is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love, a beautifully illustrated story of acceptance and love. I would have to set one aside for my neighbor's new baby when we had more in stock. Turning past the Religions section I walked towards to back of the store to my Economics Section. Even in the back of the store the space was well lit and cheerful, courtesy of the tall windows that wrapped around two sides of the store. Next the the Economics section the Espresso Printer churned away happily, filling the store with the unmistakable smell of fresh ink and paper.

Moving the rickety library ladder, held in place by tracks that run around most of the store, I considered my section and the task before me. Little paper cards hung below some of the books, marking them out as past bookseller recommendations. Of all the sections I shelved, this one had given me the most grief as I struggled to face books out in the over crowded section. Of course, it probably would not have been difficult if I had simple face out only those books with four or five

copies, but almost all of those were by white men. With each of my sections I have the opportunity to showcase the works by women and people of color, many of which are too often overlooked. I sighed. It was not as if women and people of color don't write books about economics, it is just that most people don't buy them so less of them are published and ordered by bookstores. But I could still do my own small part by facing out those books by women and people of color, in the hopes that someone would notice them. Taking most of the books off of the top shelf I piled them on a small stool and stacked the rest on the flat rungs of the ladder as I began my task. No one told me how to choose face outs for my section but after talking to my coworkers about it a week ago, I realized that I had the opportunity to make choices on more than aesthetics.

I went back to the Economics section throughout the day, checking books off the inventory list and packing them as closely as I dared to make room for different face outs. Alongside works by Keynes, Piketty, and Marx, I took care to face out copies of *Bourgeois Equality: How Ideas, Not Capital or Institutions, Enriched the World* by Deirdre N. McCloskey, *The Production of Money: How to Break the Power of Bankers* by Ann Pettifor, and *Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?: A Story of Women and Economics* by Katrine Marcal, among others, even when we had only one or two copies of each, as opposed to the five enormous volumes of Piketty's *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century*. Small gestures to be certain, but they were meaningful to me and, hopefully, would be to others as well.

The Personal Politics of Shelving

Greenlees reflects upon this in considering how the “symbolic meanings attached to some spaces and artefacts” reflect certain coded clues, which she interprets from the perspectives of employees and managers in a Finnish bookstore (147). Greenlees, drawing on Ropo et al., suggests

that “leadership can happen without the presence of the leader through the clues coded into our physical environment” (147). While Greenlees sees the physicality of the space and artifacts within the bookstore as providing behavioral cues to staff and managers, extending this analysis, I suggest that the physicality of the bookstore acts also on customers, not only employees and managers. Leadership, in terms of taste, book recommendations, and so on, happens through the physical arrangement of the bookstore. The layout, the space, and the presentation of the books, the artifacts, are reflections of the booksellers’ values, of the owners’ and managers’ conceptualizations of the symbolic meaning, or desired symbolic meaning, of their store. The values and preferences of employees become embedded throughout the store as, through the process of shelving, individual booksellers determine which books are face out, books which are displayed with their covers, rather than their spines, facing outwards on the shelf, towards the viewer. Each bookseller applies a personal, and sometimes deeply meaningful, criteria as they select books to face out, referred to as “face outs”. Each face out represents a decision made by a bookseller, as coded clues, face outs instruct the customers on where to direct their attention. In this way, customers are led by booksellers even without personal interaction. Of course, this taste leadership is enacted far more directly through displays of staff recommended books, usually explicitly tying the artifacts, books, to an individual bookseller.

When booksellers participate in the selection of display topics and the books within them, these displays become extensions of the booksellers’ individual preferences, expanding the appeal from an individual level to the store level. This implies that the contents of the display are endorsed by the ‘store,’ especially the owner and management, even if they have no actual involvement in the processes. This applies also to the selection of staff recommended books and face outs. Different

independent bookstores will of course manage their sections and assign shelving in different ways but the two most common methods I encountered were as follows. Either each bookseller would be assigned various sections, often in their areas of interest, and would shelve those first and occasionally help shelve other sections as needed, or everyone would shelve all of the sections as needed and when time permitted. I have worked in stores with both of these methods. Within independent bookstores, shelving is a political and politicized process; by selecting which books face out, booksellers are sometimes making statements about their political leanings, their values, their personal preferences.

In arranging their own sections, some booksellers actively work to ensure that there is diversity of representation or choose face outs which align with their personal beliefs and values. Others choose to spotlight books they enjoy or which are aesthetically pleasing. Often booksellers are practically constrained simply by the copies of a book which are stocked: almost universally acknowledged among booksellers is that where there are many copies of a particular book (and the opinion on whether there is a precise number of books and what that number might be) than they should be faced out, both because the buyer likely wanted that book to face out and because it saves space on the shelf. It can be a struggle to face out books that are personally meaningful to the bookseller when there are five copies of a best seller crowding out the other books on the shelf. I am certainly not alone in occasionally feeling that I am waging a battle against the books in a section to make room for my face outs as I shelve, as I did when trying to feature more diverse authors in the Economics section. Both those booksellers who select face outs consistent with their ideology and values or to send a message and those who select face outs for personal, if not political, reasons, must work within the physical limitations of shelf space and inventory. Indeed, one bookseller

described to me how she selected the books to be featured in the prominent display for the cooking section which she shelved. She explained that she was “trying to show cuisine from different cultures,” by featuring books like *the Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen* by Beth Dooley and Sean Sherman. Allison told me that she does this because “A. sells like crazy and B. because that’s not something you see that often, native American cooking,” or Jerrelle Guy’s *Black Girl Baking* which also sells well. This bookseller explained that she liked to try and keep these books stocked and on display “because those are flavors that you don’t see represented as often.” She added that this is “true for almost everyone in the bookstore: they’re trying to make sure the books written by people who might otherwise be overlooked are seen.” Though not all of the booksellers I spoke with discussed the politics of shelving as explicitly as Allison, each bookseller nonetheless described a process of selecting face outs which was highly personalized. For example, Lina was one of the few who told me that she makes an effort to face out books which she feels should be seen. For Lina, this meant facing out books either by women or, in the History section, those which tell non-Western histories. Thomas and Casey, who both do some ordering for their stores, were very conscientious about choosing not only those books likely to sell well, but also ones by underrepresented authors or which discuss issues important to them personally, which I will discuss further later in this chapter.

I made a concerted effort, particularly in the Mystery and Economics sections which I shelved, to maximize the number of face outs by women and authors of color. Anecdotally I heard many of my coworkers’ remark on the criteria by which they arranged their sections, often by making their personal favorites more prominent as face outs. Though all sections are alphabetical by author last name, as is the case in most bookstores in America and much of the world, East Coast

Books allowed booksellers to decide which books in their sections would be faced out, although sometimes the sheer volume of copies decided this for us. I myself experienced a very frustrating few weeks of trying to arrange the hardcover mystery books around ten or so copies of ‘the Word is Murder’ by Anthony Horowitz before realizing that mystery had an overstock section¹⁵. Ruth noted that, in this way, the books more than the booksellers sometimes decide which are going to face out.

Far from promoting certain books, some booksellers also actively worked to make books and authors they disliked less visible by refusing to shelve them as face outs, even when multiple copies of the same book were in stock. Booksellers did this for any number of reasons including political opinions which differed from the author’s or allegations of sexual misconduct or assault against an author, or even simply because they disliked the aesthetic of certain books’ covers. I was particularly prone to make decisions based on the latter. Meredith and Ruth also described this as their main way of shelving. But most often, when given the choice, those tomes which booksellers displayed facing out were ones they saw some value in. It was a book containing a story they loved reading, a philosophy they admired, something they found meaningful. I was told of an ongoing joke that it was possible to tell who had shelved the philosophy section in one bookstore based on the face outs because two staff members were having a philosophical debate through their shelving. For these booksellers, the process of shelving in independent bookstores allows them far greater agency than their counterparts in big box and chain stores, who are often given maps and charts to follow exactly, and enables individual expression. For these booksellers, the shelving of books as political objects becomes a politicalized process¹⁶.

¹⁵ Additional space elsewhere in the store to stock extra copies of books until space was made way for them on their section

¹⁶ <https://www.newshelves.com/>

I also talked at length with a woman who shelved the children's section at the independent store she works at. She discussed how fast the children's genre of books is changing, its "changing faster than any genre of book because, for a long time all of your protagonists in children's literature were straight white little boys...Now you're seeing more gay kids in literature, you're seeing more kids of color." This is a sentiment I heard echoed by many other booksellers who noticed in particular the greatly expanded number of picture books featuring homosexual parents and their children and the growing number of main characters who were not gender stereotyped¹⁷. The increased recognition of the importance of representation can be seen in the increase in the number of children's books featuring non traditional families, queer and transgender characters, and people of color. Allison observed,

"I think my entire life would've been very different if I had seen like one example of a little girl who liked other little girls but I never did... So, I really want kids today to be able to see that, even if they're not queer."

Shelving in an Amazon Bookstore

This deeply personal process of making shelving decisions which Allison described is starkly contrasted by the methods employed by some big box/chain stores, including Amazon and airport bookstores such as Hudson News. The latter, for example, utilizes floor maps which detail the exact placement and layout (including which books face out) of the books within them. These spatial maps are generated from corporate offices using algorithms designed to maximize sales. Where many independent bookstores rely on staff members to determine face outs, Amazon avoids the

¹⁷ If you're interested in exploring some of these books for yourself, I would highly suggest Jessica Love's 'Julián is a Mermaid' for young readers or the graphic novel 'The Prince and the Dressmaker' by Jen Wang or, a personal favorite of mine recommended by the lovely staff at Harvard Bookstore, 'the Witch Boy' by Molly Ostertag.

issue altogether by having all the books in their stores face out. The books in Amazon Bookstores are stacked three to six books deep on average, so that there is no need to restock the shelves throughout the day, as many independent bookstores are want to do. In a store like Amazon, where all books are face outs, face outs lose meaning and significance. In this way, there is no expression of individual agency in the the shelving of an Amazon bookstore, unlike the independent bookstores I visited in the Seattle area. Through the arrangement of books within the store, bookstores and sellers privilege certain types or pieces of knowledge, just as they curate this knowledge through the selection of books on hand. These messages are then passed on to the customers as they experience and perceive the space, filled with expressions of agency, around them.

Staff Recommendations:

The writing of staff recommendations is prime example through which the process of bookselling is personal. Wright argues that “the handwritten review is the most explicit form of ‘mediation’ on the behalf of workers in bookshops, which, in the context of cultural production, makes a link between author, worker and reader on the apparently level playing field of cultural taste. It represents a conversation between workers and customers as agents with mutual interests in the field of cultural production” (Wright 2005, 117). That said, I do not believe that the power of this mediation is necessarily lessened when the review is typed rather than handwritten, so long as the review is connected to an individual bookseller, either by name or with a picture. The value exists and the connection remains so long as the review is connected to a staff member through name or picture, so as to be identifiable with an individual. Through the process of making staff recommendations, booksellers can exercise some, albeit limited, influence over the store’s inventory

because, as one bookseller described for me, once a bookseller submits her recommendation, the book gets added to the order list and multiple copies are brought into the store. In small bookstores, like the one this bookseller works at, this can have a significant impact. The sheer power of a staff recommendation should not be underestimated. Indeed, Lina illustrated this power as she mentioned a book which has been one of her coworker's staff recommendations¹⁸ for years. Incidentally the bookstore they worked at sells more copies of this book than any other bookstore in the state of Washington. Through staff recommendations, booksellers imprint meaning on the artifacts within the space, providing a personal connection which does not require face to face interaction. This mediation, as a highly personal processes and expression of agency, is political.

The Personal Politics of Inventory

Bookstores are engaged in the highly meaningful process of mediating not only space, but also collections of knowledge through store displays, author events, and especially inventory. By curating the inventory and displays, bookstores shape the ways in which we interact these collections and spaces (Apte et. al 2007). This is especially true within independent bookstores within which employees have far greater control over inventory than big box/chain bookstores do. Though often determined by buyers to maximize sales goals, the inventories of independent bookstores also reflect the collective values, identities, and so on, of managers, owners, and staff. In this way inventory is a physical manifestation of the personal beliefs and values as buyers exercise agency. In this section I will first discuss the ways in which independent bookstores are able to curate their inventory and displays to their particular locations in a way that most big box/chain stores are unable to. This is

¹⁸ I am not providing the title of this book here so as to protect the identity of the bookseller who recommended it.

connected to the ways in which community is located and experienced in independent bookstores. Next I will consider the ways in which booksellers involved in selecting inventory determine which books to purchase using explicitly political and personal criteria.

Inventory and Community

Which books are stocked can have additional meaning and reflect not only the values and interests of the book buyers and other staff but also the ‘community’ in which the store is located. For example, East Coast Books in Boston is located right across the street from Harvard University’s campus. Professors, students, and academically minded individuals in general (as well as bus loads, literally, of tourists) frequent the bookstore, though not always intentionally as East Coast Books is often confused with Harvard University’s bookstore the Coop, run by Barnes and Noble. Boston area residents tend to be highly educated, as of the 2017 census 76.5% of the Cambridge area population over the age of 25 years has a bachelor's degree or higher¹⁹. The Cambridge area also tends to be liberal, in the 2016 election 89.2% of people voted for Clinton and only 6.5% for Trump. Given this average local level of education and the pervasiveness of liberal, or at least Democratic, political leanings, East Coast Books has an exceptionally large number of what might be considered more academic, or at least less mainstream, texts and sections. Not only does it feature a philosophy section, a section entitled ‘literary criticism and biography,’ and a shelf dedicated to ‘academic new arrivals’, but also sections on ‘classical studies’ (ancient Greek and Latin translations only, please), ‘cognitive science and linguistics,’ ‘culture and critical theory,’ ‘globalization,’ separate economics and business sections, ‘law and legal issues,’ sections for both

¹⁹ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/cambridgcitymassachusetts>

anthropology and sociology, as well as plain old politics. East Coast Books also boasts eight different history sections divided by region. Perhaps also reflecting the more liberal attitudes of the community, and certainly of the staff, there are sections for 'women's studies' as well as 'gender studies/ gay and lesbian,' and an erotica section specially curated by the buyers to feature only feminist works featuring explicit and enthusiastic consent. Characteristic of independent bookstores, East Coast Books has an entire section dedicated entirely to its locality, in this case all things Boston, Cambridge, and New England.

One bookseller, in describing the liberalness of her community, stated that "we mostly carry, political book wise, liberal minded things, given the demographic. We've had in the past tried stocking conservative books to give people the option but they don't sell well." The books that are stocked and displayed in the bookstore also have the potential to influence customers, as well as customers influencing inventory. One young bookseller pointed out that sometimes, simply because of the books stocked in the store, customers have been forced to look at books they might not otherwise consider. Another remarked that simply the presence and display of politically concerned books in the store provides a frequent topic of conversation with customers and staff, saying that "it's just everyday interactions, there's political mentionings." Mickey echoed this, stating that bookstores "as spaces they're just an opportunity...for political discourse. Because...very few other entities will bring in interesting political people to talk about." Mickey clarified that political discourse in this context is simply the discussion of politics and political ideas. Like Mickey, Thomas sees bookstores as important places in which to engage with different ideas and perspectives. Explaining the importance of engaging with different perspectives, Thomas said "it may be the only book you ever read from a queer transgender black immigrant but you did it once and it gave you an

insight into somebody that's not you and I think that's important. I can't really force people to do that but because I'm in a position where I can bring books in [to the store] I hope I might [help] meet that need.”

This expression of local interests and the values of the staff and owners in the inventory, which Mickey and Thomas both touched, was expressed frequently in my interviews. Indeed, I saw similar evidence of sections dedicated to local interests at many other stores, including Black Bird Books which has an entire wall dedicated to works about the Pacific Northwest and Klickitat area and works by local authors, including a few current and past employees.

I argue that by curating the inventory to the local area and interests, bookstores like Black Bird Books are working to foster a sense of community, as discussed in Chapter One. Indeed, Seattle area bookstore owner June observed bookstores “provide a safe and welcoming space where they walk in and they feel at home...that takes a very careful cultivation from the layout, music, look, to the way booksellers greet people, the way I like to look at it is we are welcoming someone into our home, to cultivate that feeling of belonging.” Miller states that “in contrast to the standardized fare said to be found in chain bookstores across the country, the independents claim that their choices of which books to carry represent community control and a responsiveness to community concerns” (Miller 1999, 387). However Miller also argues that this “represents community control” (Miller 1999, 387). Rather I argue that by stocking books about local history, featuring local authors, and hosting events with these authors, the local bookstore is representing community interests and even reflecting values. Though the distinction may seem obsolete, I believe it is important to differentiate between providing content out of necessity or demand and making it available because someone at the store, the owner or buyers most often, believe it is some importance or value in

having it readily available. Certainly, this often intersects with demand and interest from within the community, what Miller terms ‘control’, but it also on occasion exceeds or diverges from it. For example, the second owner of Black Bird Books ensured that Arthur Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons* was kept in stock, despite inconsistent and insignificant sales, because of the book’s personal significance to him and what he felt was its literary value. This owner also added and expanded a sailing section, which was of both personal and local interest²⁰. Interestingly, even Amazon has adopted a similar approach by including sections oriented towards the locality in which it is located. The Amazon Bookstore in University Village, WA, the first of its kind, for example, has a section entitled ‘Popular Books in Seattle.’ This indicates that Amazon too recognizes the importance of curating content to the local area. However, these suggestions are, exactly as the section title would suggest, simply books which are purchased frequently in Seattle, this is to say that, unlike many independent bookstores, Amazon’s University Village store uses algorithms to determine which books are popular, not necessarily including those books actually about the region. This does not truly address the particularities nor embrace the history and environment of the Greater Seattle Area. In contrast, Rainy Bay Books features not one but seven subsections focused on the local area: Travel, [Local] Authors, Pictorial, Outdoors, History, Literature, Pacific Northwest. Upon first entering the store, this section is almost directly in front of the visitor, positioned at a right angle to both the front door and the checkout desk. Just as the personal values expressed by booksellers through their shelving and selection of face outs is political, so too is a store’s inventory as it reflects both local interests and the values of bookbuyers, owners, and managers.

²⁰ From project conducted in Fall 2018 for Ethnographic Tales of the City course.

Political Stances

Through a store's inventory, independent bookstores not only function as political and politicized spaces, they also take explicitly political stances and actions, often through the owner or other person acting in a representative capacity for the business. It is common for bookstores to feature sizable displays of political books in the lead up to elections. East Coast Books for instance, featured displays on refugees and impeachment among many others. The retired owner of a bookstore in the Seattle area, Mickey, described for me an instance he was particularly proud when, during the months leading up to the 2004 presidential election, he decided to carry as many books published on politics during that time as possible, conservative and liberal, despite the staunch liberalness of his customer base.

“So many stores and people were saying they're not going to carry these books because they're right wing, but I said we are going to carry both sides evenly, and the more I looked, the more titles I found and I decided to carry all of them”

Mickey told me that a picture of his display somehow got into a local publication and may or may not have caused a bit of a stir as many people questioned why the bookstore was carrying “these republican books.” Another bookstore worker described an instance in which, leading up to the 2016 elections, her boss and the store owner had very purposefully placed a selection of pencil sharpeners and erasers shaped like mushrooms next to the “Donald Trump books in reference to Stormy Daniels’ describing...” a certain appendage of Trump’s²¹.

²¹ For more on this, refer to Stormy Daniels’ memoir, ‘Full Disclosure.’ Or you can just view this clip from Jimmy Kimmel Live <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-news/stormy-daniels-trump-penis-mushroom-kimmel-732426/>

Author events, like the store's inventory, are also often reflective of the communities in which they are located. Also like inventory, the decision to host certain authors and not others for events is both reflective of customer interests and of the bookstore staff and owner's personal values and interests. When asked if he had ever considered not inviting an author to his store, retired bookstore owner Mickey took a while to answer, finally concluding that he hadn't and that he could not even remember it coming up. To this Mickey added a caveat, where in the past he would have invited and even encouraged controversial figures, Mickey said that now "the world has changed," that even the "worst people" of the past were "kinder and gentler," but that "if it had been today there's people I would not invite, there are a lot of people I wouldn't invite, I wouldn't care."

As I have discussed in this chapter, independent bookstores are political spaces and are rendered politically mediated spaces by the exercise of bookseller agency within them. The ways bookstores spaces are constructed as political are tied to the ways in which community, discussed in Chapter One, is located within them. In the following chapter I will expand on this discussion as I consider the ways in which their work and community is experienced by booksellers.

Chapter Three: What About the Booksellers?

“Above all never be a bookseller. That is the worst of all: the hardest work and the worst paid. Yet sometimes I wish I were back in the shop. It was a great game. One was always meeting interesting people, and there was a lot of good talk.” (David Garnett, ABA 175).

As Garnett observes, this work is most often low-paid and yet those who are booksellers report loving it. The material conditions of bookselling and the categories which booksellers construct around their own work provide insight into the life courses of booksellers and how they relate to and locate community within bookstores and bookselling. In this chapter I will first explore the different avenues that brought those I interviewed to the world of bookselling, secondly why they continue to work in bookstores, third how booksellers conceptualize their work, and fourth, their thoughts on exclusion within bookstores and bookselling. Lastly I will discuss the instability of bookselling as a vocation in the greater Seattle area.

How Come Thee to Bookselling?

Booksellers come to working in independent bookstore through many different paths with diverse motivations. Through my interviews, I heard three main reasons people came to be in bookselling, first by chance or out of necessity, second to further professional aspirations, and finally there are those who simply professed a desire to work in a bookstore. Of course, some fall into more than one of these categories. I was surprised to find that half of the booksellers I interviewed, Mickey, Freddie, Ruth, Thomas, Meredith, and Eliza, first came to work in bookstores either by chance or through necessity, rather than intentionally. Of the other six, Jack, Valerie, and Allison came to bookselling to further their pursuit of professional opportunities and June, Lina, and Casey sought out bookselling because of their desire to work specifically in bookstores. It is this last group, those motivated by a desire to work in bookstores, which I shall discuss first.

Bookselling by Desire

Though most booksellers, once in the job, profess a desire to stay in bookselling, very few booksellers I talked to had explicitly set out to work at a bookstore. June, who owns a small neighborhood bookstore in Seattle is one of these booksellers, and the only one who spoke of bookselling as a long-time ambition. June, who has been reading since the age of three and wrote her first book at seven, reported that she has “always been involved and interested in books.” For June, bookselling is her self-described life’s purpose, “it feels so good to be living daily your own purpose, I feel like my purpose is providing stories, listening, and [providing] connection.” Though Lina has not always wanted to work in a bookstore, she has always had a great affinity for bookstores and even spent much of her youth in and around the one in her hometown where her mother worked. Lina, like June, also spent a great deal of time reading and writing stories from a

young age, she even aspired to be a writer for a time. Lina's path to bookselling was also one of convenience: she needed a job and there was a position open at the bookstore, she even had some experience through the time she spent when she was with her mother at work. To Casey, like Lina, bookselling was a convenient job at a time when she needed work. However, for Casey, who had worked in both bookstores and libraries while in college, bookselling was not only a convenient option and a desirable role, it also allowed her to explore her interest in publishing. Fresh out of college, Casey started work at a large West coast bookstore where she quickly learned more of the trade and advanced to management positions. Casey described her growth in the book industry: "my initial fascination with bookselling stemmed from my fascination with the booktrade as a whole. I learned so much [from other booksellers], I could see the passion that everybody had for bookselling and the people around me [in bookselling] were able to bolster me in the early stages of my career."

Bookselling to Further Professional Aspirations

Only three of the booksellers I interviewed, Valerie, Jack, and Allison, came to bookselling primarily for professional reasons, specifically to further possible careers as writers. Though as I mentioned above, Casey had initially expressed an interest in both bookselling and publishing. For Allison and Valerie, this dream is still very much alive. Allison and Valerie both expressed the hope that their time in bookselling would help familiarize them with the process of publishing and the book trade more generally. On the other hand, once he was hired Jack promptly came to realize bookselling was what he wanted to do in life. This realization quickly replaced the literary aspirations with which he had started: "when I was [first hired I] wasn't sure what to do with my life, I had

grand designs about writing the great [American] novel or becoming a journalist.” Jack described how, at the time, working in a bookstore seemed like something that would fit with his image of himself, and though Jack notes that he has yet to write the next “great American novel”, in a way he was right. Close to ten years later, Jack continues to work as a bookseller, specifically as an events manager, in the Seattle area. Unlike Jack, Valerie has since left her job of less than two years as a bookseller in the greater Seattle area, for what reasons, I do not know. However, from our interview together, I suspect she either eventually became too frustrated with her workplace, which she described as in some ways still finding its legs under new management, or she came upon an opportunity better suited for her publishing pursuits, or perhaps both. Allison, who works on the East Coast, continues to enjoy her work of the last few years as a bookseller and shift manager, while she reads and continues to work on her writing.

Admittedly, based on my time at East Coast Books, where I was surrounded by countless booksellers who aspire to publish their work²², I had expected to encounter more booksellers with literary aspirations than only these three. That said, two of the booksellers I interviewed were already published authors before they began working in a bookstore. For Casey, Allison, Jack, and Valerie, bookselling provided an avenue to explore the process not only of publishing but also of book sales, though their interests in publishing, or in Valerie’s case also in bookselling, shifted with time.

Booksellers by Chance and Necessity

Through this entire project, I was perhaps most surprised to find how many people came into bookselling by sheer coincidence. In the greater Seattle area Freddie, Meredith, Mickey,

²² I even own a book published by a former bookseller at East Coast Books.

Thomas, Ruth, and, in California, Eliza, none of them looking to be booksellers. Meredith was between jobs but, as she described, not really looking, when a friend of hers came up to her one day in the street and insisted that she “go tell Gary [the owner] that he *has* to hire you, so that was it, that was the beginning.” Ruth recalls a somewhat similar experience. The owner of a Seattle bookstore she frequented, called her up and asked if she would like a part time job. In what might be an even more unlikely turn of events, Mickey bought the bookstore he went on to own for close to twenty years on “a whim,” after a friend told him it was up for sale, though he admits this is something of an exaggeration. Eliza, like me, worked at a bookstore as a convenient summer job. Thomas and Freddie simply needed jobs. A friend recommended the job to Freddie, who was originally hired on as a seasonal worker over the winter holidays. Freddie first took the bookselling job to cover expenses after his car broke down unexpectedly and initially rejected the offer to stay on permanently. Thomas, who had previous bookselling experience at Borders, ended up applying for a job at the local bookstore simply because he needed work and it happened to be close to his home. Of these people Mickey, Meredith, Ruth, and Freddie continue to work as booksellers for close to twenty or more years and Thomas for ten. That said, the reasons those I talked to first started working in a bookstore are often different from why they continue to work in bookstores.

Why Bookselling

In my interviews, booksellers described two main reasons they continue to work as booksellers. Firstly, the social connections they form with customers and other booksellers. Without fail, every single independent bookstore employee I interviewed spoke positively about their

customers. Contrary to popular representations of the curmudgeonly, misanthropic bookseller²³, booksellers, at least in the greater Seattle area, seem to genuinely like people. They enjoyed talking with and getting to know customers, and few were able to recall even a single specific negative customer interaction. This I was particularly surprised to hear, having myself worked in retail in Seattle and in East Coast Books²⁴ and had in both encountered numerous rude or unhappy customers, which I will expand upon later in this section. These connections facilitate the accepting and comfortable work environment which also encourages booksellers to stay on. Second, booksellers described their love for books and the work of bookselling, and how, through their work, they felt a sense of fulfillment.

Connections Through Bookselling

In the Seattle area, one of the most significant factors tying booksellers to their work, often for extended periods of time, is the sense of comradery with other booksellers in the area and industry. Freddie's sentiment that "I feel more connected [working near where I live]. That's why we [booksellers] work for less, we like the people and the books," was echoed in some form or another by every single bookseller I spoke to, including Allison on the East Coast. In describing why she enjoys working at a bookstore, Meredith said "I enjoy working with the customers, they're always intriguing, you get people from all over the country." Even when asked about negative interactions with customers, apart from acknowledging the occasional grumpy or 'sour' customer, booksellers

²³ See the British sitcom *Black Books* for a particularly acute reference.

²⁴ For reference, Seattle customers, albeit in a different industry, did seem to trend more relaxed and polite than those at East Coast Books. At least no one in Seattle ever slammed a book down at me over the counter in Seattle. The book in question is Morgan Parker's *There are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*, a lovely, thought provoking collection of poetry and the book's cover, which features a *fully clothed* woman sitting on a bed which her legs slightly spread. I can only suppose that it was the cover that so incensed this particular customer who called the book pornography!! Before storming out of the store.

were united in their enjoyment and fondness of their customers. After describing one customer whose interactions almost always “[give] you that little knot in your stomach,” Freddie laughed and added that those customers, including the difficult ones, “they make it more like home, you know what to expect.”

Bookselling also provides connections to a larger, geographically dispersed and diverse network of booksellers throughout the region and the across the United States, occasionally even internationally. Booksellers become recognizable and recognized beyond the bookstore, especially in their local communities. Freddie reminisced that, according to author Jonathan Raven, Seattle in 2000, was the same size as London during Dickens’ time, it was a place where “you could still bump into people you knew on the street...the bookstore world is still like that.”

Booksellers also form connections across the industry, from publisher representatives to other booksellers, building a network of social ties through shared experiences and ideas. Many members of the book industry participate in this network, which can also be thought of as a community as, in the words of Freddie, many booksellers “will know people at different bookstores around the country.”

Indeed, close to half of the booksellers I interviewed have worked with at least two different bookstores in the Seattle area over the years. Two of the management level booksellers I spoke to described this phenomenon in alternative but not dissimilar terms. Freddie spoke of this as a type of “rotation” wherein some staff members work “for a couple of years then go back to grad school...[and] the core staff gets more attached and moves up.” Jack described this, saying that “we have a lot of people who’ve bounced around from store to store,” including several booksellers Jack described as “legends” in the industry. Indeed, Freddie listed off six different booksellers in

management who had worked at other bookstores, mostly local, prior to their current jobs. Jack's own motivation for his move from one large Seattle based bookstore to another was personal, to be closer to family. Freddie moved to a different bookstore to continue working with another coworker who had also moved. Of those who reported moving from one bookstore to another, Thomas was perhaps the exception, having worked previously at a Borders before the chain closed their doors in 2011. While a number of booksellers I spoke to have worked in large bookstores, like Powell's in Portland, at one point or another, only two had experience in a big box/ chain store. The rest of those booksellers who moved between bookstores in the Seattle area have worked only at independent bookstores.

Many of the booksellers described the support their stores received from and provided to other stores in the area. For instance, Jack described a few instances in which another independent bookstore in the area loaned his bookstore books, "if I come up short the day before an author event, I'll call around to [other independent bookstores] and ask if they have five copies I can borrow and then I'll get [return to favor]." Jack also mentioned friends at least five other bookstores in the Seattle area. Casey, who described her work place as "very supportive," echoed Jack's sentiment, saying that "I also have a lot of bookstore friends in Seattle and around the country, we can get together to support each other." She, like Jack, partially attributed her extensive network of "bookstore friends" to having worked in several different bookstores but also noted that she has "made some incredible friends through the networking opportunities that the American Booksellers Association provides." Jack even knew a bookseller who met his longtime partner at an ABA conference. In speaking of the West Sound Independent Bookstore Association, Mickey said that "it was nice to have comrades in trade... [there are] a few people with big egos and who are grumpy but

even those people are good, kind people, the kind of people I like associating with.” Casey also described making friends through the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association (PNBA) conferences. Jack and Mickey agreed that such conferences helped establish and maintain the connections they formed with other booksellers across the United States as well as in the Pacific Northwest and the greater Seattle area.

Casey summed up her experience as a bookseller by saying that “bookselling is extremely supportive network of folks...It is an industry that I think the amount of networking and support that you get from other hypothetical competitors is unique.” June agreed, observing that the greater Seattle area is not just unique because “we have so many strong independent bookstores, nineteen in a three mile radius, [but also because] together we form a really strong presences against, or next to Amazon, we work together, refer people together, we come together at holidays or conferences, it’s a really nice group of people.” Casey, Jack, June, Mickey, and Meredith all explicitly mentioned the high level of cooperation and comradery of independent bookstores in the Seattle area.

This cooperation often takes the form of something as simple as calling around to other independent bookstores for a specific book and referring a customer to one of them if their own store does not have the requested book in stock. This was one of the things Meredith particularly loves about the area she works in, “if someone comes in and wants a book about travel [or something] and we don’t have it, we say, where to go. So, it is quite a cooperation between [bookstores], it is good, by George.” Casey, who also sends customers to other independent bookstores when hers doesn’t have what the customer is looking for, acknowledged that this is not a decision that is financially beneficial to the store she manages, “it doesn’t help my bottom line but it does help that customer.” Casey clarified that though “hypothetically we are competing for same

demographic but that's not how indies operate, we share a lot of information and best practices unlike a lot of industries. [Hypothetical competitors working together] isn't something you see in most industries. [Indies are] supporting each other." As Casey mentioned, many independent bookstores even share their best practices with one another. Indeed, this sharing, which Casey said is "kind of codified into our education sessions in a really amazing way," is so common that the American Booksellers Association hosted a session on best forms at their Winter Institute few years ago. Casey described this session saying that "people were just straight up sharing their proprietary forms like consignment forms or staff checklists. All these small things that most companies keep as proprietary information, we just share with each other."

This sense of comradery was also something the booksellers described feeling in the stores they worked in. Jack noted, "one of the things that brought me to bookselling was that it was a very comfortable atmosphere with people who are like minded and welcoming." Jeanie described her own experience with this, saying that whenever she walks into a bookstore she knows she has at least one thing in common with everyone else in the store: a love of books. For Casey, the comfort also came in the form of inclusion of queer identities, "queerness doesn't feel like a marginalized thing in bookselling to me." This was echoed by Allison on the East Coast, who talked about the importance of representation of queer identities in children's literature in Chapter Two. Jack reflected, "we developed a sense of comradery, even when morale is low at a bookstore there is always a sense of togetherness and companionship even, even if you're not friends outside of the workplace, you have this sense of friendly comfort...virtually every bookstore I've talked to or been at has had that same thing. That and a bunch of used coffee cups everywhere." In their workplaces, each of these booksellers felt that they had found a place where they could be themselves

unapologetically and with people who felt the same. They felt a sense of shared values and community.

Love of Literature and Labor

Every bookseller I talked to pointed to their love not just of reading but also of connecting people with books, as reasons why they continue to work in low paying positions as booksellers. As Meredith said, “I like to read of course and I like to tell people what I think they should read.” But their love of work also goes beyond these two loves. Each bookseller described drawing a sense of fulfillment by connecting people with books. Lina pointed to her own experience with reading, which, despite her life long love of books, had struggled to master as a child. She said, “for me, I was really bad at reading and it wasn’t until, I still remember the first book I found that got me into reading. If you can find that type of book for somebody that impacts the rest of their life.”

Connecting someone with that first book that gets them into reading is one of the things Lina values most about her work. She, like every other bookseller I spoke to, considers reading important for any number of reasons, “reading is a great way for stress relief, you can escape for a little bit and try a whole different world out, you need it for learning, you need it for school, the amazing thing about books is there’s an infinite number of ideas.” This aided in the sense of fulfillment the booksellers draw from their work. Booksellers find their work fulfilling because it not only incorporates their personal interests but also because they conceptualize their work as serving a broader social or community good, which I will discuss in the next section.

When I first began this project, I expected that I would hear many varied accounts of negative experiences in the workplace, especially with customers. To my surprise, this was not the

case. As I note in the previous section, interviewees overwhelmingly reported that they rarely had ‘bad customers.’ Many who have worked in retail and other service-oriented work would likely find this surprising. Exchanging stories about outrageously ill-behaved customers is a well-established moment of bonding within many workplaces. What else are you going to talk about with those you work with except for the one thing you all absolutely have in common, the customers? Why should the business of selling books be an exception?

The reality is that it is not. While I worked at East Coast Books, the figure of the outrageous customer was a constant source of discussion, laughter, and sometimes concern. I could describe any number of odd, unsettling, or simply hilarious interactions I had with customers at East Coast Books. The following story illustrates why it was so surprising to me that Puget Sound booksellers I interviewed did not have similar stories of their own to share.

Though I had finished the training period, it was still early in my time at East Coast Books. I never did adjust to the reality that, unlike in Washington state, rain here does not bring relief from the heat, but rather something far worse than scorching sun: humidity, and today was stickier than most. The store was packed with people seeking relief from the humidity, many of them tourists judging from the many cameras and requests for directions. Busy though we were, I took some time to shelve the Poetry section, which in the normal shelver’s absence, had fallen a bit behind. As I shelved, I came across a copy of Morgan Parkers *There are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*, the cover of this particular edition features a black woman seated on a bed with her legs apart but fully covered by a white nightgown. I was delighted by the title and placed the book facing out and then promptly forgot all about it until later the same day.

As I was standing behind the front desk chatting with a coworker a tall blonde man with a distinctly Norwegian accent, marched up to me. With no preamble, he slammed the copy of *There are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*, which I had shelved earlier, over the counter and onto the keyboard of the computer in front of me. He exclaimed, “this book is pornography!” before storming out of the store. I barely managed to get out my response, “this isn’t pornography, it is actually a rather lovely collection of poetry,” before he departed. Though I may be exaggerating my five seconds of fame, it seemed to me that this incident quickly became the stuff of legends and *There are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé* became a sort of mascot for the store, a book many of us read and which we proudly displayed whenever we got the chance. Indeed, the following month, *There are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé* was featured on a summer reading display at the very front of the store.

For me, this experience was a defining moment at the bookstore, it was my first outrageous customer story. When my coworkers exchanged outrageous customer stories, I had something to contribute. I was now a bona fide bookseller, with the metaphorical scars to prove it. Yet when I shared this very same story with the booksellers in the Puget Sound area I interviewed, they responded not with outrageous customer stories of their own, but with what seemed like real horror or shock at the encounter.

Of course, I do not mean to imply that no bookseller in the greater Seattle area has encountered an outrageous customer. However, out of the twelve booksellers I spoke to for this project, only one recalled an outrageous customer incident, and of the twelve, she was the only one who works at a bookstore on the East Coast. Rather, customer interactions were highlights, not hindrances, for almost all of those in the Seattle area that I spoke with. Outrageous customer

interactions were something that brought booksellers closer together at East Coast Books, whereas Seattle area booksellers bonded more over their love of customers and bookselling. Indeed, Ruth and Meredith, both booksellers in the Seattle area, reflected that working with customers adds interest and spontaneity to their work. Though in the same line of work, this difference between the booksellers at East Coast Books and those in the Seattle area indicates that it is not so much the conditions of this type of work that forms connections between booksellers, but that the people who seek out this work tend to connect with each other in different ways and regardless of the conditions. That is, booksellers will form connections with each other, with or without outrageous customers. These connections are closely held and, as Casey describes, “every [book]store I’ve worked in my coworkers have been family.” She added that “in the past managers have been the ones to raise me in important ways and now that I am [a manager], I hope that I can do the same for other booksellers.” Jack also felt a strong desire to support fellow booksellers.

Conceptualizing the Labor of Booksellers

Through my interviews I found two main ways in which booksellers conceptualize and understand their work. First, they acknowledge bookselling as retail but also compare it to the type of work service provided by libraries. Second, booksellers do not see their business as profit oriented, rather they conceptualize their work as altruistic and providing a social good.

Bookselling as Retail

Books, are not only an important part of what makes the bookseller’s job appealing, but the work of selling books, specifically, is a key part of how many booksellers differentiate their work

from retail work in other industries. By conceptualizing books as apart from other retail objects, as special or more meaningful, booksellers also conceptualize their work as distinct, and often more valuable, than that of other retail workers. This distinction, as Wright (2005) observes, is visible even in the designation of 'bookseller,' describing it as "a historically ambiguous term which itself implicates workers in certain hierarchies of value" (119). Indeed, Wright argues that not only is a love of reading and books considered an essential quality of a bookseller, but that their knowledge of books allows booksellers to conceptualize their roles as those of "intellectual workers," (115) in a hierarchy above other retail jobs. Meredith had a different take on what makes her work as a bookseller different from other retail work: "Books are more interesting than clothing...if you find out somebody's interests, you can just narrow in on something they would like. Where with clothing, you don't know if they want a purple sweater or not." This opinion was, in various forms, repeated by at least half of those I interviewed. That said, each and every bookseller I spoke to nonetheless viewed their work as retail, if perhaps in a more interesting industry than most.

This is not to say that there are no elements of exceptionalism within how some booksellers conceptualize their work. This is particularly pronounced in the what booksellers believe is the value or purpose of their work. In one talk at the 2018 BookExpo, titled "Making Indie Bookstore and Library Events Win-Win-Wins," the roles of booksellers were not identified purely as salespeople: one speaker described the importance of booksellers, saying that they make sales and create conversation and community around books. In Mickey's words:

"And there's the whole rock star thing, booksellers become rock stars it's just a strange thing really but and this again is a sort of segment of society, they follow their favorite booksellers, they are, as well as their authors, booksellers, they're treated really well once

people get to know them. You know I'm speaking, especially of --- books, which is different than a lot of other bookstores.”

As Mickey's description of his time as a small-town bookstore owner illustrates, it is not necessarily only booksellers who view their work as exceptional, but customers as well.

Bookselling for Pleasure, not Profit

Miller questions whether a business like a bookstore can, or should, meet the needs that generate a desire for community. “Members of the book trade may want to construct an institution that can serve and be an integral part of their local communities, but their goal is also to run a business in order to make a profit,” (Miller 1999, 388). However, Miller neglects to make any distinction in her discussion of independent bookstores' goal of profitability. Certainly, the owners and managers of bookstores, independent ones included, aim to make their businesses profitable but profit among independent bookstores does not necessarily mean the same thing as it does in chain/big box stores, or other industries. Among independent bookstores, profit is often framed as what is necessary to survive, even grow, but very rarely in terms of personal wealth. Most employees are paid low wages, often minimum, but even owners and managers see small salaries, relative to other small businesses. As Casey said, “any other job is higher paying” than that of a bookseller. Indeed, throughout my interviews, “you don't go into bookselling to make money” was the refrain I heard most, in almost every single interview.

Certainly not one of my interlocuteurs pointed to their financial earnings as a bookseller as reason to stay in the business. Mickey brought up the comparison of independent bookstores and nonprofits, saying that, “bookstores are a lot like non profits...you don't go into them to make

money and you're doing it for... reasons other than just making money, making a living. They're doing it as a service, it's something they believe in." To an extent, Jack agreed with Mickey, no bookseller he knew was in the business for the money. However, Jack doesn't think bookstores' trying to make a profit is a bad thing. Rather, Jack feels that bookstores along with other local businesses can play a vital role in their locality. He reflected that we are "taught to devalue things that were happening on main street...the message was that it wasn't important what was happening in the neighborhood because we could get anything anywhere. [Bookstores] build recognition that building community is important with local businesses...that's a really big part of what we do." For both Jack and Mickey, the work bookstores do is important to helping maintain local connections, something they need to make money in order to continue doing. Though Thomas also views his work as fostering connections, he believes bookstores provide a vital service by connecting people with books that challenge their beliefs. Thomas is "always in favor of always questioning, even if you're really sure in your beliefs...you should always be questioning it, probing the edges, trying something different, reading something about something you're not comfortable with or from a point of view that you never would've considered." For Thomas, this function of bookselling sets independent bookstores somewhat apart from other retail businesses. In this way, many of those I spoke to, Thomas included, reflected that bookstores are very much like libraries in the ways they serve their geographical communities.

Though many booksellers described their work and its importance as quite similar to that of librarians, they also made two main distinctions. First, half of the booksellers and all four of the customers I spoke to noted, there is an expectation of quiet in libraries, which tends to make them less social spaces than bookstores. Second, while libraries are more accessible financially and provide

vital opportunities to read, owning a book is quite different from simply reading and then returning it. Casey described this, saying that through “bookstore [people have the] ability to bring a book home and keep it and revisit it again and again, this is critical, especially for kids. [It is so] important have books in the home.” Additionally, as both Casey and Thomas mentioned, independent bookstores generally have far greater freedom to bring in challenging or controversial events or books because, unlike public libraries, they do not receive federal funding and are not held accountable to a board or shareholders, like big box/ chain stores are.

Given this, applying a binary of profit/ nonprofit, malevolent/benevolent to the bookselling industry, as Miller does, obscures the realities of booksellers. Indeed, as Miller notes, booksellers do “generally pay low wages to their employees” (1999, 388). However, Mickey and Casey both expressed their desire to be able to pay their employees more but did not see a way they could given the current system wherein publishers set the price of the products bookstores sell. Where most other businesses are able to raise the price of their products or services when needed, bookstores are unable to do so because they do not have control over the price of the books they sell.

Instability in Bookselling

“The biggest tension we’re facing now is cost of living in Seattle and that’s caused more turnover than we want and loss of institutional knowledge. Independent bookstores can make it because they have a niche.” -Freddie

No matter the strength of their motivations or sincere love of their work, it is doubtless becoming increasingly difficult to be a bookseller in the Greater Seattle area. A majority of booksellers are paid

minimum wage or barely above minimum wage with generally limited, and sometimes poorly understood or poorly communicated benefits.

Benefits and Financial Strain

One bookseller I spoke to did not initially know that she is entitled to a fifteen-minute paid break during her shift and when she first tried to take that break, she described feeling shamed by her employer for asking about it. Though the issue was eventually resolved as the employer clarified the breaks staff members are entitled to, the oversight may nevertheless be indicative of some of the strain placed both on employees and employers at independent bookstores.

One of the most prominent impacts of this is that many of this younger generation of booksellers are saddled with college loans and debt, unlike the generation before them. Due to the type of work and knowledge which independent bookstores require from their employees, some level of higher education is somewhat essential, if not officially requisite. Accordingly, every single one of the booksellers I interviewed during this project have had at least some level of higher education, with attainment ranging from a single semester at college with a few local courses to a master's degrees. Certainly, there are booksellers, and excellent ones at that, who deviate from this standard of higher education, but that is the point, they are exceptions to what is a generally high level of education among booksellers.

This is certainly not limited to bookstores in the Pacific Northwest. Indeed, when I worked at East Coast Books, as a current college student, I was the least educated member of staff working the floor. Between them, coworkers held bachelors, masters, and even a PhD or two in a wide variety of fields. In this respect, bookselling is not quite like many other retail experiences. Among

others, Jack, Casey, and Freddie each observed that a college education, if not essential to bookselling, is often an asset. Casey, who does most of the hiring at Evergreen Books, noted that though a college degree is not a requirement for booksellers, almost all her applicants are college educated, “booksellers are expected to know everything, people who are interested in bookstores are those who went to college, [not usually] those straight out of high school, it is those who are excited about learning and educational opportunities.”

Both Casey and Jack described booksellers between the ages of twenty and forty as the “new generation of booksellers” or the “younger generation.” In Casey’s experience, this younger generation of booksellers is more widely college educated than the booksellers before them, “anecdotally, one hundred percent of booksellers under the age of forty have gone to college. Some have gone on to pursue a higher education as well. She explained that this is not a judgment, but rather an “indication of the millennial existence, where the expectation is you go to college, which was not necessarily the case thirty years ago, it is a very different generational expectation.” Though rates of higher education attainment in the United States have increased drastically, in some places by as much as fifty percent since 1950²⁵, this increase has been especially marked in the Seattle area. Close to sixty two percent of people over the age of twenty-five in Seattle have a bachelor’s degree or higher, twice the national average (Seattle 2018).

Five of my seven interlocutors who count themselves as a part of this younger generation, Jack, Lina, Valerie, Casey, and Thomas (who are all under forty), live in the greater Seattle area. Jack, Lina, Valerie, and Thomas each agreed with Casey’s observation that few of the new generation of booksellers will ever be able to afford a home. Casey observed that among “the established

²⁵ A recent census bureau report found that in 1950 thirty five percent of Americans completed high school, as of 2017, thirty five percent of those over the age of twenty five hold college degrees (U.S. Census Bureau 2017).

generation of booksellers, a lot didn't go to college so they didn't have student loans, were able to work their way up [in bookselling] and twenty or thirty years later were able to put down payments on homes." She added that even those older booksellers who did attend college likely accrued far less debt. Casey herself recently finished paying off her own student loans, something which took her almost ten years to do. For most of this time Casey, as a manager, has been paid a salary rather than by the hour and she worries that paying off student loans will be even more difficult for booksellers not in management, most of whom are paid by the hour. Jack explained that "there is a large crop of dedicated career booksellers in Seattle in their twenties, thirties, and forties who are the next wave, I count myself [as one and] not one of us owns a home or feels like we're financially secure enough that if we lost [our sources of] income for an length we'd be okay. Living here is expensive, housing has gone up, insurance has gone up, refinancing , those of us who rent its brutal."

Bookselling and Housing

Concerns about the cost of living impacting booksellers are certainly not unfounded. Indeed, over fifty percent of Seattle city residents rent, not an easy feat given that the median rent in the city is one thousand three hundred and seventy-seven dollars, almost four hundred dollars more than the national average of nine hundred eighty-two. It is commonly recommended that individuals should not spend more than thirty percent of their monthly income on rent, those who spend more than thirty percent have historically been considered "housing-cost burdened" by the United States government (Schwartz and Wilson 2008, 1). For those working forty hours a week on the fifteen dollar minimum wage, their monthly income is twenty four hundred dollars, before tax, paying the

roughly thirteen hundred dollar average of rent would account for close to sixty percent of their monthly income before tax, almost double the recommended amount. Not only is Seattle real estate among the top ten most expensive cities, but Seattle ranks sixth most expensive for the overall cost of living (Sun 2018).

The increasing cost of living in Seattle places pressures on booksellers, many of whom are unable to afford living directly in the city. Indeed, Casey noted that most of the booksellers she knows are qualified for income restricted housing in Seattle. She herself lived in a subsidized apartment for a time. When she went through a break up she found it difficult to find affordable housing as she scrambled to find someone to share rent with. Though not a bookseller, Jeanie also described the difficulty of finding housing in Seattle. When she first moved to the city in the mid 90s, “at that time it wasn’t that bad, it was reasonably affordable but occupancy was always really tight.” Right before the housing boom in Seattle, the apartment Jeanie had been living in for roughly seven hundred dollars a month was torn down to make room for several new town houses. After this she moved away for a few years but when she came back to the Seattle area in 2014, she found it even more difficult to find housing than before. For Jeanie, it was “almost impossible to find anything affordable and I ended up sharing with a friend because I couldn’t find anything I could afford in neighborhood I wanted to live in. We ended up finding a place in...the only reason we could afford was because landlord offered for six or seven hundred dollars below market rate.” Jeanie’s friend later moved out and she had to rush to find another person to split the rent with, as had Casey.

In order to afford living in Seattle, both women found themselves in the sometimes-precarious situation of depending on another person with whom they could share an

apartment and rent. Freddie, himself an established bookseller, connects the precariousness of living in Seattle on a bookseller's income with heightened turnover with the Seattle area bookselling business, saying that "I think there was more stability years ago because it was less expensive to live in Seattle so staff turnover was less." Jack, like Freddie, saw the difficulty of living in the Seattle area as a significant threat to the area's book industry, it is "definitely a concern of mine [that when the] people who carry that institutional knowledge retire there's a lot of us who would take that torch but can't afford to. There are a lot of people who love their [bookselling] jobs but just can't afford it or they suddenly break up with their [partner] who has helped them live in the city and they either have to move or get a different job suddenly." Now that Jack, like Casey, is in a management position, he also hopes to pass on what he has learned in his time as a bookseller and provide the support and supervision which he felt was sometimes lacking. He described this, saying that "professionally this is an industry where sometimes support can be a challenge within the day to day working environment, especially in management level [because] we're all independent thinkers and there's not a lot of money flying around, you sometimes have to seek a support network out. I sometimes see myself as support for others." At his current bookstore, Jack felt that this is less of an issue, especially since the store recently reevaluated its managerial structure and duties. Nevertheless, the intense individualization of tasks and lack of oversight has exacerbated the disorganization and loss of institutional knowledge that sometimes follows the departure of an established bookseller from the industry or a particular store.

Family life and Bookselling

Bookselling can provide a flexible, and for many, supportive workplace however, as per many other retail industries, booksellers are also often faced with irregular schedules, for which they receive varying degrees of notice. This irregularity, combined with the general low pay seen at independent bookstores, can make it difficult for booksellers to balance different parts of their lives, particularly family.

Of the booksellers I interviewed, three, June, Meredith, and Ruth, came into bookselling after raising their children and one, Freddie, who had previously spent about ten years working at an independent bookstore in Seattle, returned to bookselling after a decade long hiatus of teaching and child-rearing. During this time, Freddie continued to work outside the home, gaining a teaching license and teaching in the same district as his daughter, which he reminisced allowed him to take the same breaks as her and even advocate more successfully to the school district. While raising her six boys, Meredith also wrote the manuscript of what would later become her first book. June described her own experience of having a family and aspiring to work in a bookstore saying that “my very first bookstore job was at [a] bookstore as a part time bookseller. I raised my girls and decided it was time to get back in the workforce and start my aspirations of working at a bookstore. I went from bookseller to [manager] and then met up with my business partners and started my own store.”

June’s story, of transitioning into bookselling after her children are grown, was far from uncommon. Indeed, the three female booksellers over the age of forty that I spoke, June, Meredith, and Ruth, each of them came into the vocation after raising children. June, Meredith, and Ruth are each quite fond, to say the least, of their work. They are also not reliant on it for financial support. Indeed, Casey noted that many of the booksellers she knows are only able to work in their jobs

because of the financial support they receive from their partner, which can, in both Jack's and Casey's experience, place a bookseller in a difficult position.

Moira, who raised three young children while co-owning Black Bird Books with her then husband, initially described her experience quite positively, saying that bookselling is a great business to be in while raising a family, except around Christmas time because the store becomes so busy. Moira added that bookselling is retail and every individual handles the variable work hours differently, that "it depends on your personality how you manage your time and with a young family." Moira described "the tricky part" as the time between October and Christmas the store hours and the number of customers both increase and, for many bookstores, it's the time of year that supports the store for the remainder of the year, it is the make or break season. For Moira, this meant seeing less of her then husband: "with a young family with kids you're not going to see that much of whoever is working at the store and it's the major holidays, the difference was we would just show up and go to the bookstore and hang out." Casey, who has no children, spoke from her experience and observations as a manager, echoed Moira's experience, saying that, "if you have family it can be hard initially, especially if your partner is working Monday through Friday, nine to five. I don't know if anyone has that [schedule] in bookstores, so it can be hard on families because you're working nights and weekends, it can be really taxing." However, Casey also pointed out that she knows "so many colleagues who have families and kids and love their jobs and that's not an issue, I've seen people work it in great ways, it is a totally doable thing for folks with family but again it's retail so the schedule isn't normal." This was similar to many of my other interlocutors' reflections on their schedules: that the schedule can be irregular or odd but bookselling is retail and that is to be expected.

The tensions of a retail schedule tend to increase around the winter holiday season. Casey, for instance, shared that even before interviewing potential new hires, she informs them explicitly that “there is a vacation freeze from Thanksgiving to New Year’s Eve.” The difficulty of balancing both family and work, especially during the lead up to the Christmas season, as Moira recalled, brought on stress and she suspected her late husband had difficulty with this: “I think it stressed [my then husband] out when we were at the store because he felt torn between wanting to be with us and feeling the need to take care of the store. When the store was closed was the easiest time to have [the] kids at the store and he didn’t feel so split and could enjoy both [them] and the store. [They] used to love [being at the bookstore] after hours, it was a fun place for [them] to go and hang out.” Similarly, I have very fond memories of spending time at my father’s bookstore growing up although the bookstore certainly kept my dad very busy, and not home as often as any of us would have liked, when I was young.

Exclusion in Community and Bookselling

Several of the booksellers I spoke to felt that there is, a level of dissonance between the idea of independent bookstores as gather places or community spaces and which people are actually able to access these spaces and how. Thomas observed, “we [independent bookstores] like to think of ourselves as a safe space, I don’t know whether people who don’t work there think of it as that, [but for us it is] for anybody really, we try to be as open minded as possible and simultaneously as intolerant of suppression of any kind.” Though Thomas suggested that independent bookstores are inclusive spaces, he also repeatedly questioned the extent of this inclusivity, as did others, pointing to the demographics of their usual customers: often white and well educated, or else with the

financial flexibility to buy books. Valerie was also particularly critical of the limited accessibility of independent bookstores.

Though Valerie, Thomas, and Mickey certainly made the most explicit acknowledgements of the limitations of inclusivity within independent bookstores, in total eight, more than half, of the other booksellers I spoke to also alluded to different kinds of barriers to inclusion. The financial ability to purchase books, which the four customers I spoke to, Moira, Jeanie, Lisa, and Susan each described as sometimes posing a barrier, was also referenced most often by booksellers. Setting aside the case of a bookseller in Hawes, England, who received widespread condemnation for charging customers fifty pence (about 65 cents USD) to browse in his bookshop²⁶, I was unable to find any bookstore in the United States which charges admission or a browsing fee²⁷, though charging admission for author events is becoming an increasingly common practice among bookstores²⁸. However, none of the bookstores I visited or interviewed people from in the Puget Sound area currently charge admission to events, although East Coast Books, where I worked over the summer, does charge for some of the larger events it hosts in venues outside of the store. That said, many financial barriers are far less concrete. For instance, though there may be no rule or policy requiring that customers browsing in a bookshop, or any other store for that matter, must make a purchase, some people will nonetheless feel pressure to make a purchase if they enter the store.

²⁶ See www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-bookstore-browsing-fee-20170106-storey.html for more on this. It should be noted however that the store owner claims not to have collected the fee, rather asking customers to pay so he could judge how likely they were to make a purchase based on their response.

²⁷ I am not including bookstores which are located within a larger venue (like an museum or airport) which charge for admission.

²⁸ Eight years on from when the New York Times first noted that more bookstores were charging for events, see www.nytimes.com/2011/06/22/business/media/22events.html, charging admission for events is still a hotly debated topic within the bookselling world. That said, none of the bookstores in the greater Seattle area charge for their events.

As discussed in chapter two, even the reputation of a community, like that of bookstores which Thomas describes as “liberal bastions,” can dissuade some from feeling welcome. This is to say that exclusion, like community, is manifold and experienced in different ways. For instance, Thomas described an encounter he had while working at Borders in the Southern United States, “we ran out of one of those far right fire brands book...on the first day. We had ordered a pallet worth, so it wasn't like we didn't bring in a lot but one customer very specifically got angry when I told him we didn't have one because we'd sold out. He said he was sure we were hiding them in the back and were trying to censor them.” Even in Borders, which seemingly put a great effort into maintaining political neutrality, this customer assumed the booksellers were not neutral, and would even go so far as to make a politically conservative text unavailable to him. This illustrates one of the challenge, not just with locating community within a bookstore or other retail space, but of locating community anywhere: in order to define a community, some form of boundary must be drawn and with the bounding that forms community inherently comes exclusion.

This happens not only with customers but also, as Casey reflected, with booksellers. As Casey, who is the manager of Evergreen Bookstore in Seattle, described the process of hiring at her store, she reflected that diversity, or lack thereof, among the staff influences who even applies for work at the store. She observed what a difference it can make when you “walk into a bookstore and see people who look like you, it makes it a more appealing [space] for marginalized identities.” Casey proposed this might be one of the reasons there are so many women, often more than men, in bookselling as opposed to other industries. With several friends in Seattle’s tech industry, Casey reflected that “when you see an industry that is so female heavy it takes an easier entry point for

women, it is the opposite of tech: you walk into a tech company and it is all men [but] in bookselling you walk in and it is a place you'll feel respected and that your intelligence will be respected."

Every Bookseller I spoke to described the community of their bookstores not only as a geographical area, but also formed through connections, like shared values, or even just through the simple love of reading. In this way, booksellers viewed their communities not only as physically bounded but also as extensions beyond the store. June described feeling this with regards to her own Seattle area bookstore, "our community is our neighborhood... and that community can branch out from there...and include anyone who has chosen to walk into the store, we have customers from california and New York and the East Coast. Just because they come in and feel like they belong here so they are a part of our community."

Though, as Miller points out, locating community within bookstores tends to blend meanings "together to describe a physical place and a set of ideals which are juxtaposed against the world," (1999, 389). However, Miller's concern that "the community ideal is an exclusionary device that demands conformity and ignores very real differences between groups," though well founded, is not entirely the case in independent bookstores in the greater Seattle area (1999, 390). It is not the idea of community so much as the ability to participate or feel welcome in it that excludes people from Seattle area bookstores. Far from demanding conformity, many booksellers appreciate their workplace because it allows them to make connections with people different from themselves while also allowing the booksellers space for self expression and identity. In this way, community within bookstores invite the expression of "very real differences between groups," though opposing ideologies may be the most frequently perceived exception.

Conclusion

I did not investigate if independent bookstores have some inherent importance, nor do I make that argument. Rather, in answer to my original question of whom the survival of independent bookstores matters to and why, I found that it is important to individuals, customers and employees alike, because of the meanings they hold and the roles they play in community, knowledge production, and the lives of these individuals. Not only are they significant due to the livelihood of the booksellers who work in them but also because of the experiences they deliver to the lives of individual, customers and employees alike.

In Chapter One I discussed my finding that independent bookstores function as gathering spots in which community can be located, providing a sense of belonging or rootedness for

customers and employees alike. Booksellers and customers also discussed the limitations and exclusion of community in this chapter.

In Chapter Two Independent bookstores stand apart from most big box/ chain bookstores in the extent that individual booksellers of all levels have a great deal of agency and are able to enact their personal preferences and values on the inventory and store space. I argue that this agency and action heightens the symbolism within independent bookstores which play the key function of prominent knowledge shaping institutions.

In Chapter Three I considered the experience of booksellers in the Seattle area. I found three main reasons they came into bookselling, a desire to work in a bookstore, chance or necessity, or to further professional aspirations in another field, usually writing. The reasons booksellers continue in their vocation are quite different. I found that their love of bookselling, the connections they form, the comfort of the workplace, and the sense of fulfillment they derive from their work entices booksellers to stay in this work, even if they move from one independent bookstore to another. I also found that booksellers often conceptualize their work as exceptional, not profit oriented, and vital to their personally defined communities. However there is a common disparity between the material compensation booksellers receive for their work and the qualifications required for bookselling. That is, booksellers are most often highly educated, generally with a bachelor's degree or having spent at least some time in college, but usually are paid minimum wage or not much higher. Booksellers experience instability in their industry through low wages and difficulty finding housing in the Seattle area. Booksellers also acknowledged the exclusion which can occur in their workplaces, both as customers and potential employees.

In each of these chapters I have demonstrated the contradictions of exclusions and inclusion of community. Independent bookstores embody this paradox of community, just as any other community does. This paradox is created in the bounding of community. Retail spaces, independent bookstores included, are unstable communities, or at least participation in them is unstable as it can vary with financial situations, as discussed in Chapters One and Three.

Yet the deeply rooted ties and sense of community within independent bookstores springs from this passion, reflecting the joy booksellers find in helping others find a book that suits them personally. It is no mere coincidence that bookstores and not pharmacies or some other kind of local business, are increasingly treated as gathering places. Those who work at independent bookstores, with their exceptional knowledge and passion, form personal connections with those who step foot in their place of work. I have found that these personal connections, whether forged through a one off book recommendation or sustained over years of visits, draw people specifically to independent bookstores above most big box/chain bookstores. Whether the appeal of these personal connections is rooted in a nostalgic longing for the past, as some scholars have suggested, I do not know, nor have I attempted to uncover this in my research. Instead I hope that future studies will take the baton and investigate this in time (Miller 1999).

Future study should also consider the particular experiences of booksellers or color and perhaps explore why feminist and black owned bookstores have not experienced growth, even as general independent bookstores have within recent years.

I would like to end now with Richard Sennett's (2017) concept of the public realm as an open space. Sennett argues that openness "is not the same as formless...Openness can be planned...That aspect of the public realm which seems most determinate, its cultural rituals and

practices, can also be open rather than closed; migrant cosmopolitans can make it so. Bridging all these aspects of openness is the dimension of time, evolutionary time which challenges the closed, over-determination of form and its correlates of equilibrium and integration” (13). I suggest that community, in its many forms and manifestations, is a process, with the potential for more openness, just as the public realm is. Though community is exclusionary, the spaces in which it is located can yet be more open, including Seattle area independent bookstores.

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