

Flinging Wide the Doors:

Intimate relations in independent bookstores and
the elimination of exclusiveness

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I. Introduction

Independent bookstores sell books, just as any other retail establishment sells its wares. But for me, and for many of the people whom I have interviewed in the past few months, their feel and function is distinct. While larger stores feature the same titles on the bestseller list, stock copious amounts of other consumer goods, and offer a very carefully calculated and calibrated “experience” with as close to universal appeal as possible, the survival of independent bookstores reflects the survival of a diversity of tastes and interests. As Edward Shils argued in a 1963 essay on “the bookstore in America,” a good bookstore

...puts one ‘in touch’; it permits first contacts and offers prospects of greater intensity. It is a place for intellectual conviviality, and it has the same value as conversation, not as a ‘civilized art’ but as a necessary part of the habitat of a lively intelligence in touch with the world.¹

Forty years later, this description still feels accurate. While the chain stores have grown and prospered since Shils wrote his evaluation, small independent stores continue to be the bearers of this legacy of intellectual potential and exchange. What is surprising is that these societal goods continue to carry value for the people who work and patronize such spaces. The critique of other large chain stores, such as Walmart, Home Depot, Target, Gap and Starbucks, is quite similar to that launched at Barnes and Noble and Borders, even though both booksellers have arguably gone to tremendous efforts to provide their patrons with an atmosphere that is as literary as possible. Still for many of those that see the value in the independent store, other considerations come into play beyond comfort, convenience, and cost. Thus,

It is no accident that the fiercest debates about chain retailing, and the ones that most stir public opinion, are now taking place in the field of bookselling. Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, there has been a consistent belief in the

¹ Shils, Edward. “The Bookshop in America.” *The American Reading Public: What It Reads, Why It Reads*, ed. Robert H. Smith. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1963. pp. 138-150.

distinctiveness of the book, an uneasiness with viewing books as ‘products’ to be bought and sold like any other commodity...Books, as storehouses of ideas and as perceived means to human betterment, have long been viewed as a kind of “sacred product.”²

In my own research and interviews, I was struck again and again by this idea of books as articles that are sacred and apart from other products which we buy and sell. People who feel perfectly fine about buying grande lattes at Starbucks and pencils and paper from Staples come to small stores to buy their books. Perhaps such conspicuous consumption have to do with our continued perception of reading as a leisure activity that ought to be enjoyed in a slow, quiet, and measured way, even in a world where few other activities call for such a sacrifice to time management.

Yet just as other intellectual and artistic endeavors have to be learned and worked into one’s daily routine, reading is by no means an ingrained habit for the majority of American families. Finding ways to include literature (and bookstores) into the fabric of our habits is a crucial responsibility if we are to maintain acceptable levels of literacy, but it is one that has been neglected by many. It is this lack of interest by the “masses” that leads to the establishment of an intellectual elite, entrusted with the task of keeping bookstores in business, but also serving as gatekeepers who may only allow a highly qualified few into their rarified circle. The promotion of such class and education divisions helps no one and actually hurts small businesses as well as the writers and potential readers who are not allowed to join the conversation.

How are we to encourage reading in a way that is neither threatening nor exclusive in its tone? The answer lies in the cultivation of a young readership. Denise Brennan, an anthropology professor at Georgetown University, explained to me how part of their family’s ritual when exploring a new city always includes finding the best local bookstore. Finding the

² Miller, Laura J. *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. p. 19

store centers their experience, the family looks for these sites in order to get a “feel” for a new place and to ensconce themselves in an environment which is both comfortable and familiar to them.³ While you can now travel to almost any city in the United States and beyond and find sameness in chain stores and restaurants, the consistency of such an experience, while it may create a feeling of security, does not allow the traveler to get a feel for the diversity of viewpoints, styles, and community settings that our nation possesses. Instead, it creates a false sense of culture as replicable and interchangeable.

For young children, it is especially important that a diversity of experiences be made available and accessible. While financial considerations may not allow families to travel around the world, we are missing a primary function of literature if we do not utilize it to visit and explore the worlds beyond our own immediate one. Children need to be introduced to this potential from an early age and they need to feel comfortable laying claim to it.

We are deluding ourselves if we do not hold this knowledge of the worlds beyond our own to be a necessary and precious one. Furthermore, if we truly believe that the megastore that got its start in middle America and now has thousands of outlets around the world is equally amenable to serving the needs of every population it targets, we have lost sight of a fundamental component of culture as we understand it. While certain aspects of the human experience may be more or less “universal,” it is in the particulars, the quirks, and the continued capacity for reinvention and dialogue with the rest of the world that each culture acquires legitimacy and meaning.

II. Declining Readership and its Implications

³ Brennan, Denise. Personal Interview. 26 October 2006.

While the fate of small bookstores may seem trivial to some when far greater crises on the national and global level crowd for our attention, I feel that the preservation or abandonment of such spaces is a strong indication of a society's capacity for intellectual and social renewal and change. If we have no room for diversity in reading material and we lose our sites of intellectual exchange, we are entering dark days indeed. As Dana Gioia, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, succinctly states,

While oral culture has a rich immediacy that may not be dismissed, and electronic media offer the considerable advantages of diversity and access, print culture affords irreplaceable forms of focused attention and contemplation that make complex communications and insights possible. To lose such intellectual capacity—and the many sorts of human continuity it allows—would constitute a vast cultural impoverishment.⁴

His fear for the decline in readership is a legitimate one, but how are independent bookstores implicated? Should we not look at schools, libraries, and universities first? And what can small, notoriously exclusive small bookstores do that megastores like Barnes and Noble or Borders cannot? I would argue that one of the key determinants in whether someone is a reader or not has to do with how they frame the experience of reading. While students from first grade on up will always be required to read books, and we live in a highly literate society where one's ability to read is crucial to financial and intellectual success, we are not a culture that places value on the written word in and of itself. As books have been abandoned in favor of television and the Internet as sources of information and contact with the outside world, we are embarking on a treacherous process of disengagement with the diversity of opinions and experiences that well read individuals once accessed on a regular basis.

As I will discuss later, independent bookstores are particularly fertile sites for variety of engagement with the world that the written word affords. Unfortunately, they are often highly

⁴ *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. Research Division Report #46. National Endowment for the Arts, June 2004.

restrictive spaces where one's "membership" depends on an already strong commitment to intellectual pursuits. The task at hand, I would argue, is for these stores to find ways in which to elicit new forms of engagement, rather than demanding it as a requirement for entry. We as a society must find new avenues to foster readership. While schools may require it on the institutional level, they are not having much success in imbuing students with a love for reading that transcends its most basic use. Booksellers and other literacy advocates should press for the development of a lifelong readership, aimed not only at self-education, but at political and social engagement as well.

In this paper, I intend to discuss what independent bookstores are doing right as they draw in their particular set of customers. I will then examine ways in which they could maintain their special niche while becoming more open and inviting to those who, while they certainly have the capacity to be lifelong readers, may not consider reading to be an important part of their socio-political commitments or identity. This project is a critical one, and not just for the continued survival of small stores for their own sake or for continued support and consumption of all things literary.

More than reading is at stake...Readers play a more active and involved role in their communities. The decline in reading, therefore, parallels a larger retreat from participation in civic and cultural life...As more Americans lose this capability, our nation becomes less informed, active, and independent-minded. These are not qualities that a free, innovative, or productive society can afford to lose.⁵

II. Independent Bookstores, Recruiting Readers, and Social Betterment

The substantive part of my research on independent bookstores as sites for positive social and intellectual exchange and reading as a good that must be strengthened and encouraged in our

⁵ *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. Research Division Report #46. National Endowment for the Arts, June 2004.

society took place during an anthropology course I took in the Fall of 2006. In the class, we were encouraged to pick sites and projects where we had a high level of access and familiarity. I chose independent bookstores as my topic because I had a part time job at one, Bridge Street Books, and because I was interested in why and how they managed to stay in business. As this project's focus expanded into a thesis topic, I had trouble narrowing down what I thought would be important to add in order to make my research more oriented toward the aims of Justice and Peace Studies. In the end, I determined that the critical point my original research missed was just how to make the exclusive, intimate interactions and experiences that small bookstore employees and their patrons participated in a more accessible part of the lives of more people.

While I do not like chain bookstores, and, because of my job, feel more than a little guilty even entering them, I do have to acknowledge that they can be much less intimidating spaces than their smaller competitors. This is not to suggest that independent bookstores ought to change their offerings or environment. Instead, they should place more emphasis on reading as an inherent social and intellectual good, one that is freely available for anyone who cares to participate. Society needs more readers, writers, and interlocutors, regardless of where they shop. Yet when traditional methods of outreach are not increasing readership, independent bookstores could be critical in pulling them in. First, however, we need to examine just why people are already involved in such cultural and intellectual projects, and how their involvement encourages or restricts new participants.

III. Anthropological Fieldwork in Bookstores

*“To be honest, it’s comforting to go. Something about Borders can be so cold. [At a small store] it’s like walking into someone’s house. You like that it’s messy, you like that the floor is sagging in the middle...It’s that warm feeling, like comfort food.”*⁶

During my fieldwork on independent bookstores, booksellers, and their patrons, I was often struck by how excited many people were to speak with me on the subject. Although age and gender varied, my interlocutors shared a deep appreciation for the goods independent bookstores offered up, both tangible and intangible. Unlike so many other sorts of shopping, in bookstores one has the opportunity to browse and linger. In such settings, individual patrons and purveyors can feel that they are valued and that their thoughts and words have merit. While bookselling is a business and book buyers are consumers, the financial transaction of sale and purchase is often far down on the list of why people frequent them.

My fieldwork explores the ways in which independent bookstores are sites for positive exchanges between staff and customer and how one’s identity as a member of the world of thinkers, readers, and writers can be a deeply meaningful one for many people. That is not to say that there are no contradictions involved when independents’ employees and patrons hold themselves up as crusaders against consumer culture. “The industry remains perilously poised between the requirements and restraints of commerce and the responsibilities and obligations that it must bear as a prime guardian of the symbolic culture of the nation.”⁷

How can booksellers balance their political and social views with their desire to turn a profit? Is there something inherently elitist when a given store caters almost exclusively to the university educated? Do book buyers really love the quaint little bookstore, or are they merely fascinated and entranced with the idea of themselves as intellectual and unique? Furthermore, if

⁶ Bill Healy. Personal Interview. November 11, 2006.

⁷ Miller, Laura J. *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. p. 7.

these sites were to fling the doors wide to the general public, would they necessarily lose something vital? My hope, of course, is that reading can be a thoroughly democratic enterprise. Yet in my research and interviews, it sometimes appeared to be just the opposite. How to balance the intimacy and sense of shared interests and commitments that now reigns in bookstores with a more inclusive approach aimed at eliciting the participation of new sorts of patrons may be a difficult enterprise, although it is a worthy one.

In grappling with such issues, I find that the questions grow more complex. That I see the inherent good in the preservation of small bookstores is a perspective I must state at the outset. Whether that means that such sites always live up to their full potential as agents of community renewal and intellectual debate is not so certain, but at least there is room for these possibilities. Ultimately, I found that people go to the stores I researched because they offer what they are after: interesting titles, a pleasant atmosphere, and perhaps most importantly, the chance to feel included in something they feel has social and intellectual worth. Why these benefits should be largely accrued by members of society who already possess advanced degrees and high levels of cultural capital is an idea I believe needs to be explored.

In a society where less and less personal contact is necessary and more and more of interactions are mediated by corporate protocol, part of the allure of the small store experience is wrapped up in the feeling of inclusion. Beyond the chance for positive interactions with staff in a comfortable environment, reading itself offers a sense of belonging, legitimacy, and competence. For young people especially, such positive constructions of identity are few and far between: their feelings of connection come with a favorite video game, TV show, or sport, not through a shared pursuit of knowledge or inquiry. We need to find ways in which to include young people in the intellectual projects at hand, which, far from demanding specific interests or

areas of expertise, only require an open and eager mind. Although the bookstore patrons and employees I interviewed are all participants in this community of knowledge-seekers and purveyors, they are not all alike, nor do they strive to be. It is their very diversity that makes dialogue and exchange possible. Including the voices and views of a wider population, far from harming such engagement, would only deepen and broaden it.

V. Methodology

This project's focus grows out of conversations I had with 13 interlocutors in formal interviews, as well as from my experiences as an independent bookstore employee and bookstore patron, and my attendance at various readings and bookstore events that took place at three independent bookstores in DC: Politics and Prose, The DuPont Olsson's, and Bridge Street Books. The people I interviewed were all either bookstore employees or customers of at least one of the three stores in which I did fieldwork. While age and gender varied, most were college educated and had liberal political views. Although several said that they sometimes shopped at chain stores or on the Internet for certain books (university presses, for instance, do not sell that many books in actual stores), they all considered themselves to be fairly frequent patrons of independent bookstores in Washington, DC.

Because my research was multi-sited, I did not have a set amount of time that I spent "in the field" each week, although I did draw on my part-time job at Bridge Street. This was very helpful in recruiting subjects for my interviews, and also in continuing to get a sense of how people felt about small bookstores. As I note later in the essay, spur of the moment conversations between myself and customers about the merits of a small, independent, and "serious" bookstore such as Bridge Street were quite frequent. Politics and Prose and Olsson's

Books both host numerous events each week in which authors read from their new books. I attended several of these readings. Not having attended a reading previously, I was impressed by the level of exchange between writer and readers at many of the events. Bookstore patrons seemed perfectly comfortable questioning authors on their writing style and process, and authors seemed very comfortable on a more or less even terrain with their readership.

In terms of written material, I looked at works that focused on “bookstore culture” and at studies and articles that dealt with issues of readership. I used memoirs of former booksellers and serious readers and two sociology texts, *Reluctant Capitalists*, which is an exploration on the history and current state of the book industry and looks at the debate on chains versus independents, and *Inside Toyland*, an account of the reinforcement of gender and social inequality in toystores. I also drew on *What’s Love Got To Do With It?*, Denise Brennan’s ethnography of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic, and Katherine Frank’s book on strip clubs and male desire, *G-Strings and Sympathy*. These latter two, although I did not think of them as relevant immediately, were especially helpful in my examination of the customer’s personal and psychological reasons for being an independent bookstore customer and how dynamics of power and identity emerge in a setting that may be more exclusive than inclusive. I also drew on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital in looking at why independent booksellers and customers alike see such sites as being elitist “in a good way.” As my project expanded to looking at ways to dampen this elitist attitude, his ideas on *habitus* and acts of distinction via consumption practices were extremely useful. Finally, my personal experiences and convictions regarding independent bookstores have figured very prominently in both my choice of topic and in my ways of examining the research materials, framing interview questions, and analyzing my findings. While we discussed in class that sometimes having an oppositional

view of your subject matter can be helpful in “speaking truth to power,” I cannot help but be an independent advocate.

VI. Research Sites

The stores I eventually chose to focus on were Politics and Prose, Bridge Street Books, and Olssons Books. While all have been in business for over 20 years and have become fixtures in the lives of many readers in Washington, they vary in size and customer base: Politics and Prose is nationally known and highly successful, but still under one roof, while Olssons, in business since 1972, has had varying numbers of store locations over the years in Washington and Northern Virginia. Bridge Street, unquestionably the smallest, has managed to survive in Georgetown for 26 years, despite the intrusion of Barnes and Noble only 3 blocks away.

While all stores identify themselves as community and reader oriented, they approach this commitment in different ways, measure their successes distinctly, and have different goals for the future. Their patronage often reflects these distinctions, although many of the people with whom I spoke had been to all three bookstores at least once. Beyond the desire for variety, these stores were chosen mainly as a result of the reception I received in each. I approached staff at Chapters, a small bookstore near Metro Center, and at Kramerbooks, located in DuPont Circle only a few blocks away from the DuPont Olsson’s, but they could not be persuaded to grant me an interview, either because of scheduling difficulties or lack of interest in my project. It was important to me to get the perspectives of both patrons and purveyors, and so these other stores were dropped from my research. If I had had more time or been more persistent, I am sure I

would have been able to access more interlocutors, but I feel that these three sites are distinctive enough to offer a nuanced picture of bookstore culture in DC.

As a city, Washington also presented interesting challenges for my project. While a large percentage of the population who work in the city and live either in the neighborhoods where these stores were located or in nearby Virginia and Maryland are extremely well-read and highly educated, the population in Washington, DC proper cannot make the same claims, suffering from poor schools, economic struggles, and gentrification projects. Even with excellent bookstores, libraries and universities in their midst, a large number of these residents do not see themselves as readers and do not patronize the sites I had chosen. While each independent bookstore owner I spoke with viewed this fact with varying levels of indifference, I do not believe such a callous attitude is appropriate. A strength of independent bookstores is that they are grounded in the local and have the capacity to be highly community-oriented. When booksellers ignore large sectors of people as not being eligible customers, they are doing themselves and the people they ignore a grave disservice. Books and the knowledge and wisdom they contain have a liberatory potential that should not be restricted to the economic and intellectual elite. That my research sites often did just that is a problematic tendency that I believe needs to be addressed and reconsidered. That said, if such stores can increase their appeal and successfully interpellate a wider customer base, it would be a hopeful sign for their own preservation and for the nation's readers.

Politics and Prose has been in business for 23 years and is a Washington institution. In their 1984 business plan, Barbara Meade and Carla Cohen, the store's co-founders, wrote that "Politics and Prose will be a bookstore and more... We are hoping to become a gathering place for people who are interested in reading and talking about books... The store will serve as a

convenor for authors and their readers... We hope to provide greater opportunity for presentation and questions.”⁸ Its customer base, although varied, has the reputation of being an older crowd of professionals and retired people, although the store does have a substantial children’s section.

Located on Connecticut Avenue in the Cleveland Park neighborhood, it is a large two-story building with room in the back for author readings and book signings and a café and space for book group meetings on the first floor, Politics and Prose’s exterior does not have the cozy, hidden-away feel of many other independent bookstores. It has grown from a much smaller space across the street to become an almost overwhelming large, but beautifully organized, collection of books and other things that readers might like: stationery, journals, greeting cards, literary and political magazines, music CDs, and neat stacks of Politics and Prose T shirts. There are three islands going down the center of the store where the information, register, and customer service areas are located. This spatial emphasis on service very much mirrors its owners’ commitments: the store has a large and knowledgeable staff whom they are very proud of. Politics and Prose is nationally known, made famous by its attraction of renowned authors for readings and book signings. The store won the Publisher’s Weekly Prize for Bookseller of the Year in 1999, and attracts customers and visitors from all over.

According to Jane Rifkin, a retired professional in her 60s who moved to DC recently, Politics and Prose is a great place to take out-of-town guests, who have often heard of the store through CSPAN’s broadcasts of author readings or through word of mouth. This level of notoriety, combined with the widespread popularity of its offerings, means that the store has become a destination, to point where “people can go there, browse, and have a coffee as an evening activity, and there’s never any pressure to buy”⁹ This feeling of ease and comfort does

⁸ Coen, Carla and Barbara Meade. *Politics and Prose 20th Anniversary Pamphlet*. 2004. page 4.

⁹ Jane Rifkin. Personal Interview. October 1, 2006.

not happen by accident; it has been carefully encouraged since the store's founding. Cohen and Meade have created a space where "...our customers see us as a community center...In this increasingly fragmented age people crave public places where they can relax with friends or in solitude."¹⁰

The bookstore is also committed to expanding its customer base through active reader recruitment in a way that the DuPont Olssons and Bridge Street Books are not. According to Cohen, "Children's literature is the hope for the future," and it was with this in mind that the store bought out the inventory and recruited the staff of the children's bookstore *The Chesire Cat* when it went out of business in 1992. The children's section of the store, in comparison to some of the other areas, is by no means intimidating: the area is bright, the displays are diverse, and the staff is ready, willing, and extremely encouraging of parents and children alike. Such a hospitable environment is important, especially because of the awkwardness many people feel around reading from an early age. As Carla notes and the National Endowment for the Arts Literacy Report attests, young people are particularly uninterested in reading, with the steepest decline in readership occurring in the 18-24 age group. Between 1992 and 2002, literary reading decreased 28% for that demographic, from 53.3% to 42.8%.¹¹ While many small business owners may not feel a need to orient themselves toward children as important customers, Politics and Prose recognizes the importance of establishing positive connections between young people and books.

The Olssons in DuPont Circle where I did my field research has a different feel, partially because it caters to a very different demographic: the customer base seemed to be far younger than that of Politics and Prose. It, too, is in a commercial space that seems ill-suited to house a

¹⁰ Politics and Prose Website.

¹¹ *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. Research Division Report #46. National Endowment for the Arts, June 2004. p. xi.

independent bookstore. Located a couple of blocks from DuPont Circle on Connecticut Avenue, it is situated in a large, modern and angular brick building at the end of a block it shares with Krisy Kremer, Cosi, Ben and Jerry's, and a movie theater. The store has large display case windows where books are artfully displayed in a way that, to me, indicates an advertising department's handiwork. I am later confirmed in my assumptions, Olsson's does have an advertising department, although individual store managers do have a large say in what kind of displays and advertising are done. While large, it is only one story, although there is a ramp that takes you to a higher level of shelves along the back.

The music section comprises roughly one quarter of the store, where CDs and records are sold and DVDs can be rented or bought. This DVD rental dimension is something that is fairly new, and the manager, Ryan McGovern, is excited about it. He views the music and DVDs as potential draws for people that maybe would not come in to just a bookstore and hopes it will bring new business to the site. The inclusion of other sorts of media for sale, while potentially a smart move from a commercial standpoint, is also indicative of what consumers find enticing and what they may pass by without a second glance. While book buying represents about 5.6% of our recreation spending in the United States, spending on electronic media has risen to 24%.¹²

By including DVDS and CDs in his inventory, McGovern is acknowledging that literature may not be a profitable enough ware to sell alone, even for an independent bookstore. The trend overall, however, supports his decision-making. Bookstores of all sorts and sizes are doing their best to boost flagging patronage via the inclusion of coffee shops, stationary, music sections, and the like. Yet for people who are enticed by the extras, do the books become more appealing once they are inside? The idea for Olsson's is to get more customers in the door,

¹² *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. Research Division Report #46. National Endowment for the Arts, June 2004. p. xii.

particularly younger ones. This strategy has been working well, a fact that points both to independent bookselling's fragility as a solo enterprise, but also to its continued capacity to innovate in light of changing circumstances and consumer behavior.

The DuPont Olssons does not have a café or other seating areas, although browsing is still very much encouraged. Although he views having multiple locations as being beneficial in that each store is allowed to specialize to a specific customer base, it seemed to me that the mere fact that books from all 6 locations could be accessed in a day (an Olssons truck goes to each store daily, moving needed inventory from location to location as needed) does not make up for each store's limitations in certain areas. For instance, although the Olsson's in DuPont had a large literature section, it did not include much of a history section or a children's section. This calls into question how far a bookstore can extend itself without losing what makes it worthwhile.

Many people would be perfectly content with the DuPont Olsson's inventory, but for others, not having a fairly comprehensive section on a wide variety of subjects might not be acceptable. Yet there is a trade off here; by having more than one store, Olssons is making itself more available to potential book buyers living in the greater Washington area. McGovern noted that the business's owner, Bill Olsson, was always looking for "different locations, different neighborhoods that can be better served by an Olsson's," but that he did not feel that they had had to make sacrifices in personal commitment or customer service because of this expansion. "We're still a neighborhood bookstore," he said.

Indeed, with the exception of having a slightly less comprehensive inventory, the bookstore has managed to retain most of the charm of a one-of-a-kind bookshop. While multiple stores may not be the best option for every independent store, they can potentially have a greater

impact on the communities they inhabit, as well as bring together wider variety of interests and assets. Each Olsson's has a different feel, yet all of the locations strive to provide the same level of customer service and expertise. Although I did not do research beyond the DuPont store, I learned through my interviews with customers that this effort to be consistent and yet still hold onto that small store ambiance has been largely a successful one.

However, Denise Brennan, a long term Olssons customer, did describe feeling frustrated with the "shrinking literature section" at the Olsson's location closest to her home. This frustration is worth exploring; of course a smaller store or group of stores will never have the same volume of inventory that larger stores with hundreds of outlets manage to provide. Yet when Brennan feels dissatisfied with the literary offerings at her local Olssons, her response is not to run for the nearest Barnes and Noble. She goes to another Olssons, such as the one in DuPont, or if she already knows what book she is interested in, she can order it and pick it up at the local store.

Bridge Street Books was founded in 1980 by Philip G. Levy. The store is located on Pennsylvania Avenue and 28th Street in Georgetown, two doors down from the Four Seasons Hotel. It is flanked on either side by a men's clothing store and a café, both run by Turkish immigrants. The store itself is two floors but narrow, with exposed brick walls and uniform pine shelving lining the walls as well as a few free standing bookshelves. Although it has a cozy feel, the only seats available are two metal folding chairs and an old wooden one positioned between the front door and the check out desk. People who come to linger and converse with Philip, Rod, or one of the four college student employees will often sit in this chair for long periods of time, just chatting. Frequently, other customers are drawn into these conversations: I have come into

the store to find three or four men all clustered around the desk with Philip sounding forth about politics, religion, music, his favorite football team, Arsenal, or Washington history.

Although I have only worked at the store for three years, I have the strong sense that conversations such as these are why Philip remains in business. He does not reserve this taste for a good conversation or a good argument for people he knows: anyone who comes in the store may be pulled into a debate. He may demand to know what kind of music a woman from New Orleans listens to or question a college student with parents living in Lebanon about the level of security at Israeli checkpoints. Sometimes, people are taken back, offended, or uncomfortable, but more often than not, they seem somewhat pleased to be asked these things. And Philip certainly seems pleased to speak with them: sometimes, I have come in to take over the store for him at five pm and he will stay to 7:30 because he will become so wrapped up in talking to people. Yet although Philip will talk to anyone, he certainly has his favorites, and his predilections. If someone comes in and asks for a Danielle Steele novel, he scoffs. Although he is a businessman, his primary objective seems to be preservation of an atmosphere he feels comfortable in and sees as valuable.

His attitude of complacency can easily come across as one of exclusivity, and there is a definite sort of one-upmanship at work in some of the conversations between bookseller and customer. While those who know Philip and are familiar with the store either participate in these exchanges or take them with a grain of salt, for the uninitiated, Bridge Street Books may appear elitist and far from inclusive.

Part of that image has to do with the lack of initiatives aimed at drawing younger customers in. The children's section is one of the smallest in the store, and kids of all ages, whether accompanied by their parents or not, are not made to feel particularly welcome. Bridge

Street is clearly a “store for grown ups.” Such a restrictive identity can be a welcome one for adults looking to escape the hassles of their day and read in peace, but it also limits the scope of the store’s influence. As the National Endowment for the Arts emphasizes, America’s youth are far from avid readers, and encouraging them to develop a taste for literature is no small task. Given that reality, I feel that Bridge Street is in a sense rejecting its larger purpose to feed and nurture an inquiring readership when it does not consider serving young people’s needs and pulling them into the bookstore environment as crucial components of its agenda.

The store is very much as it has always been, with few nods to changing times. Unlike Politics and Prose or Olsson’s, which have newsletters, websites, and staff recommendations, Bridge Street hangs on while refusing to change its operations. As Rod, Bridge Street’s manager, said, for Philip, the store is his living room. “There’s something to be said in going with what you know, but you have to balance that a little bit with being aware of what’s going on in the world. [At the same time] it’s always a question of what you want.”¹³

While I am very partial to the Bridge Street environment, I have to acknowledge that it does not strive for universal appeal. Yet while Bridge Street leaves out the younger demographic, they do serve a diverse customer base in terms of tastes. There are people, mainly those in DC for business or more conservative customers, who never go upstairs and thus never see the drama, poetry, philosophy and cultural sections that reflect a very liberal, even radical, political orientation. And there are others, mostly friends of Rod, the manager, who only go upstairs, which is where the two floor to ceiling shelves of poetry are, carefully selected by him personally. These include many small press publications which cannot be found anywhere else in the city. So you have these two distinct customer demographics, and the great thing about Bridge Street is that they meet each other. Certainly people from all walks of life might shop at

¹³ Rod Smith. Personal Interview. September 29, 2006.

Barnes and Noble or get coffee at Starbucks, but they do not interact among bookshelves, they can easily ignore one another. Overhearing other people's views and seeing the books they purchase is an inevitability in a small space such as Bridge Street. Quite possibly the opportunity for chance meetings and spur of the moment debates is what bring people in, staff included.

VII. Customer-Staff Interactions in the Retail Environment: Alienation vs. Inclusion

One of the notable differences between the independent bookstores I studied and other retail environments, particularly those with corporate headquarters and vast amounts of stores and employees, is that the employees I spoke with working in independent bookstores expressed far more satisfaction with the level of respect and consideration they received from customers. The customers, in turn, often cited the level of customer service available to them at independent stores as one of the main reasons they continued to shop at such sites.

Auda, a sophomore at the George Washington University and an aspiring poet who has worked at Bridge Street for 6 months, spoke of how working in the store has given him the chance to interact with a close-knit group of poets and patrons. "It's a really cool community because you meet these people [at Bridge Street's semi-weekly poetry readings] and then you read their books and you think 'wow, this is genius.' It's a very supportive environment, way more so than I would have guessed." For Auda, part time employment at Bridge Street has opened doors into a literary world and community of which he might never have been aware. Moreover, his positionality as an employee aids in his legitimacy and growth as a poet, just as his position as a student of longtime Bridge Street customer and GWU professor Dan Gutstein gave him the credibility he needed for Bridge Street to hire him. In contrast, sociologist

Christine L. Williams and investigative journalist Barbara Ehrenreich both assert that minimum wage jobs and the “unskilled” labor usually lead the employee nowhere.

George Ritzer (2002) aptly uses the term *McJobs* to describe the working conditions found in a variety of service industries today...McJobs are not careers; they are designed to discourage long-term commitment. They have short promotion ladders, they provide few opportunities for advancement or increased earnings, and the technical skills they require are not transferable outside the immediate work environment.¹⁴

Although independent bookstore employees make about the same or even less than other low wage workers, their experiences may be markedly more positive and may lead the employee in new directions. Moreover, independent bookstore employees, hand picked by conscientious and particular small business owners and managers, are walking poster children for the product they sell. That they are readers themselves who can and do engage their customers as fellow readers creates a different sort of interaction, one where purveyor and patron meet on common ground and share ideas, interests, and perspectives.

VIII. Salespeople as interlocutors

Other factors at work in these differing environments are themes of commitment, loyalty and stability. While service jobs are supposedly designed for the young and irresponsible, bookstore employees and employers alike expressed a strong sense of commitment to the stores where they worked and their fellow workers. In my interview with Carla Cohen, co-owner of Politics and Prose, she repeatedly emphasized how essential her staff was in the store’s success. A major part of their philosophy is to provide a very helpful staff, whether that means to always answer the phone with a person rather than a recording or to praise—and pay—their employees

¹⁴ Williams, Christine L. Williams, Christine L. *Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping, and Social Inequality*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006.

for their knowledge, expertise, and commitment to the store. Carla told me proudly that they have people working there who have been with them since the store was founded and that image of inclusivity and a “family” orientation was visible in the office, their 21st anniversary pamphlet, and in some of the interactions I witnessed between staff members. It was also visible in the large framed photo of a beaming Carla and her partner, Barbara Meade, seated in armchairs with the entire staff of Politics and Prose gathered around them.

While many large corporations also try to project, and even cultivate, such a warm family atmosphere, it becomes more and more difficult to create one as a business grows larger and staff grow more numerous. Even in Politics and Prose’s case, the “one big happy family” ideal must be hard to maintain. Still, a big part of its success comes from the level of respect granted to the employee by their fellow staff members, their managers, the owners, and perhaps most essentially, by their customers. Anyone is more likely to feel loyalty and commitment to an enterprise in which they feel they play an integral and valuable part and to which they can feel positive in their commitment. For many bookstore employees, often the young, the restless, and the disaffected, finding a job one believes in and is not bored to tears by can be difficult. While college student employees are a separate case, many people in their 20s and 30s and even 40s who have not found satisfaction in the traditional middle class trajectory of college, high power career and suburbia can feel at home and appreciated in an independent bookstore setting in a way that they cannot elsewhere.

Ryan McGovern, manager and buyer for the DuPont Olsson’s, spoke of how, after leaving GWU in the second semester of his sophomore year and feeling lost and directionless, the evolution of his “holiday hire” job at Olsson’s Books into fulltime employment “...felt like a

good fit...[you can sell] a product you can believe in an environment that's pretty positive"¹⁵

Instead of feeling trapped and disappointed in a "McJob," Ryan expressed a sense of belonging and fulfillment in his work at the bookstore. And when he made comparisons between his own work and those of his college graduate peers who might be working at a desk from nine to five in an office every day, he seemed to count himself as lucky. Working somewhere like Olsson's means that there is "More freedom, more opportunity to be creative and express who you are. You're not behind a desk all day...I deal with lots of different aspects [of the job] on a daily basis. There's comfort and a challenge [in this type of work]."

This rosy picture of how a temporary, typically low status job as a salesperson can evolve into a meaningful career is not often replicated, especially when the employing organization grows larger and more inaccessible for the employee. Ryan is able to use a host of interpersonal, problem solving, and administrative skills in his work. Sarah, a friend of mine who worked for Abercrombie and Fitch one summer, described her experience as an employee there as being boring and frustrating because her the requirements of her job did not permit her to interact and "serve" the customer in any real way. She said,

In the position that I was in, I was not told to show the clients products, or even to help them really meet their needs.. I was a "Brand Representative" at first which later changed into "Model", my job was to greet the customers with the given tagline of that season. I was not allowed to leave the front room under any circumstances unless I walky-talkied it to a manager.¹⁶

Although working at a chain clothing store may not be the same as working at a chain bookstore, what Sarah describes as a problematic emphasis on rules and regulations over actually helping the customer locate and select what they would like to purchase is probably applicable in the case of any large company with many stores, and mirrors some of my interlocutors' complaints with regard to their experiences at Barnes and Noble and Borders. When the

¹⁵ Ryan McGovern. Personal Interview. September 27, 2006.

¹⁶ Sarah Grunberg. Personal Interview. December 2, 2006.

organization dictates the types of interactions possible between employee and customer even down to the vocabulary used (Sarah had to greet each customer with the catch phrase “have you tried our new sexy skinny jeans?”) it is understandable that neither the employee nor the customer will feel acknowledged and valued. While this certainly does not mean that all independent bookstore employees are knowledgeable, friendly, and attentive, at least in a less regulated setting, customer and employee can interact on a *negotiable* level, where each person’s preferences and personality can contribute to the exchange.

Given the increasingly service-oriented slant of the United States economy, one would imagine that more job sites would emphasize the importance of respectfully horizontal relations between salesperson and customer. However, as Barbara Ehrenreich and others note, too often, just the opposite is true. For this reason, independent bookstores, as well as in other commercial establishments that allow for similar sorts of patron-purveyor interactions, can lead by example in encouraging changes in the workplace dynamics. While Christine L. Williams described her working environment at a chain toy store as being fraught with anxiety over one’s performance and hostility between the customer “guests,” the bookstore employees I interviewed stressed their level of satisfaction with and enjoyment of the work that they did. Raising the minimum wage might be number one on the liberatory agenda for America’s service workers, but I would argue that changing work place interactions and environments would not be far down on the list.

IX. Arbiters of taste?

While I paint a sunny (though in my experience, fairly accurate) picture of customer-staff relations in the independent bookstore environment, it is important to note the class and education level of the participants in these enlightened exchanges. Undoubtedly, part of the

reason customers were so polite to me at Bridge Street was that I was surrounded by the trappings of legitimate culture. As my fieldwork progressed, this issue became more and more difficult to avoid. Customers sought acknowledgement from me, the bookstore representative, that their tastes were not only of a higher intellectual caliber than the norm but also that simply shopping at an independent store could be worn like a badge of honor, as if money spent there was somehow not spent, or at least not spent in the way the masses might spend it at Barnes and Noble or Home Depot.

In a number of senses, this dynamic was built into the topic from the beginning: all the stores I researched are located in the wealthier neighborhoods in Washington, and with only three exceptions, all my interviewees were in the process of completing or had completed at least a bachelor's degree. In general, all three of the bookstores' clientele tended toward being middle to upper middle class, highly educated, liberal, and more often than not, white. That such characteristics are the norm suggests that the warm and open environment customers and employees alike project for such spaces may not be as free as it appears.

In Pierre Bourdieu's essay on cultural capital, he stresses the connections between social class, education level, and taste. According to him, people who have not been raised and taught to appreciate certain cultural goods lack the facilities to appreciate or understand them fully. "A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded...A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason."¹⁷ Bourdieu's assertions emphasize the pervasive, inescapable influence of class identity as manifested by

¹⁷ Bourdieu, Pierre. Richard Nice, Trans. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

tastes, education, profession, etc, and do not allow much room for agency on the part of individuals seeking to formulate a distinct identity for themselves.

In the bookstores I researched, this deterministic, exclusionary attitude appeared when the subject of an elite customer base arose. Although the fact that such views of the inferior tastes and sensibilities of the “masses” exist and may underlie some people’s preferences for small independent stores as bastions against the rabble was not surprising, but people were far more open about their self-identification as intellectual elites and their desire to situate themselves in environments that recognized and honored “high culture” than I had expected.

When asked whether she felt that Politics and Prose’s identity as a “serious bookstore” was an alienating one to some and whether she considered it to be a problem, co owner Carla Cohen said, “I think we are elitist—we project our commitment to what matters...we don’t sell bestsellers...we offer a different type of shopping opportunity for people who care.” She went on to say that she did not see this attitude as being the factor that discouraged the more mainstream shopper from patronizing her store. According to her, the kind of customer who does not share the Politics and Prose’s values “...wouldn’t come here anyway.” For some people, “a book is the equivalent of a light bulb or a bag of potatoes,” and if that’s the case, coming to an independent store is not worth it. While the Politics and Prose website claims that the store draws people from all walks of life, young and old, black and white, this sort of assumption about who can and cannot appreciate what they have to offer is an exclusionary, gate keeping tactic not at all in the vein of inclusiveness and welcome. Yet certain bookstore patrons I spoke with seconded her views in one way or another when they made the claim that selections, service, and environment at chain stores did not meet their discerning standards.

Richard Hamilton, a World Bank economist, said that while he went into stores like Barnes and Noble and Borders on occasion, he said he found it “kind of depressing to go and see so many books of a type that I’m not interested in at all.” That Mr. Hamilton has the right to patronize those stores that best cater to his needs is a given, but what happens when these books of the “type” to which he is referring are maligned, along with their readers, as being inadequate as well? This is the concern of Laura J. Miller, whose book, *Reluctant Capitalists*, deals harshly with independent bookstores’ somewhat inflated views of their own exceptionalism. She argues that independents’ “snooty attitude” is what has driven many customers away. She writes, “Those independent booksellers who did not reform their assumptions about appropriate reading behavior and tastes found it increasingly difficult to compete against friendly chains...Today, the notion that the bookseller should not interfere with consumers’ legitimate right to enjoy any book that suits their tastes is wide spread.”

Miller’s assertion that it is not the “place” of a bookseller to pass judgment on others’ reading material may be a valid one, but does this mean that a bookstore employee’s level of familiarity with and appreciation for books has no bearing in whether they do their jobs well or not? According to many of the customers she interviewed, the answer would be yes, but my findings indicate the opposite: many customers sited their interactions with store employees as being key to their enjoyment and level of satisfaction with an independent bookstore experience. Why such a difference between my experiences as a participant observer and interviewer and the experiences of Miller, who spoke with far more people than I did, although most of them probably did not self-identify as primarily independent bookstore shoppers?

A possible explanation could lie with my own positionality vis a vis other independent bookstore employees and customers. While Miller probably approached her subjects as a more

or less impartial researcher, I am both immersed in and project a certain attitude regarding taste and consumption habits where books are concerned. The people I interviewed were able to make assumptions about my views and feelings, and I was able to infer that many of them felt similarly, or at least presented themselves as such. By confirming one another's preferences and prejudices as legitimate, my interlocutors and I interacted as members of the same social group. Because of this shared identity reinforcement, expectations and exchanges between those that I interviewed and myself were different than those in Miller's research, and they yielded a distinct response.

X. Recognition and Identity

The identity and education level of salespeople is usually not a point of interest for shoppers. In her book on toystores, sociologist Christine L. Williams notes that "at best, retail workers are taken for granted by consumers, noticed only when they aren't doing their job. At worst, they are stereotyped as either dim-witted or haughty, which is how they are often portrayed in television and in the movies."¹⁸ In most stores, customers' brief interactions with employees are a necessary means to an end: the location and purchase of a desired product, but in the independent bookstores I researched, this relationship often became far more involved. This happens, in part, because such customers often imagine a far more lateral relationship between themselves and bookstore staff than they might in other settings.

Denise Brennan, an anthropologist, described how whenever she went into the DuPont Olsson's, she and the former manager and buyer would chat. He would always ask her about

¹⁸ Williams, Christine L. Williams, Christine L. *Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping, and Social Inequality*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006. page 48.

what new ethnographies had recently come out and whether he should order any of them for the store. Even though Olsson's did not have a large section on anthropology, he would also order a couple copies of whatever she recommended. She, in turn, would ask for recommendations from him when looking for a new book for herself or as a gift. This relationship of reciprocity contributed greatly to Brennan's sense of commitment and loyalty to Olsson's. The buyer recognized her as a scholar, an intellectual and a reader whose opinion was worthy of taking into account, and she returned this level of respect and appreciation for the expertise and knowledge he brought to the table. We need to find ways to make all customers feel so valued and included. Everyone has expert knowledge to share. We need to encourage that sharing.

Themes of presentation and recognition arose repeatedly in my fieldwork. While customers might be critical of the salespeople at chain stores for the lack of knowledge or customer service skill, it often seemed as if what they were looking for (and usually not receiving) was the opportunity to have a meaningful interaction. Donald, a self-employed limo driver and voracious reader, noted that one of the things he liked about his experiences at Bridge Street was that there was time for conversation with its employees and a chance for he and the staff to get to know each other. "I like that people call you by your first name and that you feel that they're always going to look out for you [in terms of thinking of what books you might be interested in]...It's just more accessible, more of a personal touch. If you [the employee] worked at Barnes and Noble, I'd never get to know you." While Donald may be somewhat exceptional in his desire to spend considerable quantities of time sitting and chatting (he often spent 1 or 2 hours seated in the chair alongside the sales desk while I worked, touching on a wide variety of subjects), his desire for more personal, authentic interaction in a commercial setting is not so unusual.

It is a sad testament to our shifting priorities that the acknowledgement and inclusion both Brennan and Donald describe as so intrinsic to their experience of small bookstores have become such rare occurrences. Yet these shared sentiments between very different bookstore patrons point to a high level of *potential* for bookstores as welcoming, encouraging and accommodating places for all. While Donald did not attend college, he is a highly intelligent, thoughtful, and inquisitive person. As a customer, he is treated as the intellectual he is. In other facets of his life, he may have different roles to fulfill, some of which may not be of his choosing. But within the walls of Bridge Street Books, he is afforded the respect his mind merits and engaged in dialogue. Everyone, regardless of their socio-economic background or education level, deserves to participate in these sorts of exchanges if they so choose. Moreover, they are *capable* of it, just as the employees are. We can always transcend (or believe we transcend) the purely transactional nature of our relationships when we want to. Both patron and purveyor are granted more room for engagement and free exchange when this is possible.

XI. Acknowledgement for Sale

In Katherine Frank's ethnography on strip club regulars and male desire, *G-Strings and Sympathy*, she theorizes that men come to strip clubs not for sex, which they are almost guaranteed *not* to get, but rather for positive, albeit sexualized, interactions with the strippers and the chance to feel affirmed and recognized as successful, generous, and powerful males. When discussing their choice to patronize strip clubs over other forms of sexual entertainment (pornography, prostitution, or lingerie parlors) many men asserted that the interactions they paid for at the strip club were somehow more authentic, personal, and *real*. One man explained,

...the thing is, with an escort you're paying by the hour...So to me, you know for sure by definition that they're not there with you in any way, any time they're in there, just to be with you...[whereas at the strip club] some of the girls I've gotten along with the best and hung out with the most, just because of the time involved, they've started feeling bad about it. The good ones, the nice ones. They actually started feeling...That becomes less of a transaction and more quality time.¹⁹

While the men's perceptions of strippers' level of emotional attachment or engagement with them may be exaggerated, they are quite similar to the ways in which independent bookstore customers frame their interactions with and appreciation of the staff. To me, this points to people's level of discomfort with their identity as "consumers" and "buyers" of other people's time, attention, and service. Independent bookstores' commitment to the provision of an intimate, browser friendly atmosphere and a competent, friendly and intelligent group of employees allows customers to disassociate themselves, the employees that help them, and their buying behavior from the dehumanizing dynamics of a sales transaction. Instead of feeling like shopaholics, book buyers can feel positive about their patronage of a small store and its owners or employees, who they may come to think of as friends and intellectual equals. In the same way, strip club regulars, instead of seeing themselves as perverts or voyeurs, can feel good about the money they give to strippers in tips because it shows their chivalrous appreciation and may help the stripper pay rent, support her family, or pursue a higher education.

Although they pay for extremely different products, both independent bookstore customers and strip club regulars seem to be after something other than what they ostensibly pay to receive. I would argue that the interactions patron can have in these spaces allows for a species of identity performance and a chance to feel recognized and appreciated. This opportunity makes the sites desirable outside of their roles as sellers of stripteases and books.

¹⁹ Frank, Katherine. *G-Strings and Sympathy: Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. pgs. 186-187.

Carla Cohen seconded this idea with her summation of what made stores like Politics and Prose stand apart. She said, “My philosophy is to do things I would like. [That means offering] a comfortable seat, and a pleasant shopping experience and sales person. It makes people feel good and taken care of, which is something we don’t get enough of in our daily lives. It’s a much-needed mental massage.” In such a setting, bookstore customers can feel both catered to and intellectually and socially appreciated. That they are not paying for these social “services” makes them all the more special, just as strip club customers may actually enjoy having an attentive conversational partner when they pay for a stripper for a table dance more than the actual performance they receive.

Just as Williams asserts that chain stores dehumanize employees and render their individual worth illegitimate or of no consequence, such homogenized shopping experiences and interpersonal sales interactions dehumanize the customer as well. In romantic relationships, no one likes to feel that someone enjoys their time and company only if they spend money, but drawing on Frank’s fieldwork and my own, I would argue that even in commercialized relationships, people would prefer to feel that they have value and significance as more than a nameless, mindless consumer. Independents’ customers can frame themselves as patrons of high culture, freedom of expression preservationists, or committed stalwarts against the spread of big box store mediocrity, and they can receive recognition for their efforts within the confines of a given bookstore and beyond.

XII. Bookstore crusaders?

A man came into Bridge Street with a friend of his, browsed for a bit, and then brought three books up to the desk to buy. As I rang up his purchases, he told me that he was from

Pittsburgh but came to Washington about once a month on business, and that while here he always stopped at Bridge Street. Turning to another customer whom he did not know, he remarked that there were so few good bookstores left in the country and that he felt that this one just had to stay in business, which meant that he just had to come and buy something every time he had the chance to help that happen.

This man bought about forty dollars worth of books, yet the way he spoke made it sound as if the entire future of Bridge Street Books rested on his admirable commitment to shopping there once a month. For him to make such a melodramatic claim in Barnes and Noble or even in a larger independent such as Olsson's or Politics and Prose would be laughable, but he was very much in earnest.

That he would have such strong feelings about the success or failure of a store located hundreds of miles away from his home, although noteworthy, was not entirely surprising. Washington is a city that many people visit regularly or live in temporarily. During their stays, however brief, they often seem to develop a fondness for local stores such as Bridge Street or Politics and Prose. Can such sentiments still be called a commitment to the local? The man in the vignette above lives in Pittsburgh. The same day he came in, the store had a book party for a German author who lived in Georgetown and was a regular customer for five years, but now lives in Berlin. These men each *traveled* to Washington, and to the bookstore, and yet they seemed to have the strong sense that the store was worth preserving, and that to preserve and patronize was somehow still their responsibility, even at a considerable distance. Another man came in earlier who used to live in DC, and he remarked to Philip how glad he was that the bookstore was still here, even though he was now living abroad and had not been in the area since the mid 90s. What do these loyalties-at-a-distance signify? Is it merely that these men, all well into middle age, like the idea of things staying the same so they can return to the familiar when they travel back to Washington, or is it about something else, too?

Part of the man's independent bookstore supporting rhetoric struck me as proprietary, and in a sense gendered. I have not heard women comment on Bridge Street's continued existence as somehow relational to themselves (I came back and *you're* still here, waiting for me). That does not mean that they never do, but as I said, some of the language the men employ is very much akin to the way the German tourists in Denise Brennan's ethnography, *What's Love Got to Do With It* seemed to feel about the preservation of their Dominican sex-scape. Just as the sex workers were seen by their patrons as being dependent and needing their attention, appreciation, and continued financial support, it seems as if some bookstore customers feel some sense of pride and legitimacy knowing that a quaint little bookstore in the nation's capitol is somehow dependent on them.

The German tourists' preservation-minded attitudes toward the sex workers and the Dominican sex-scape of Sosua are often offensive, racist, and condescending, yet it is the sex workers' ability to continue to provide such men with the fantasy of power and sexual desirability that brings the men back as consumers year after year. In a sense, independent bookstores' success also depends on their continued ability to give the customer what they want most, which, in many cases, is the familiar, warm reception a small staff and store atmosphere can provide. If these stores cease to hold the customers' interest, the rhetoric behind their patronage (commitment to small businesses, aversion to chains, etc) will not keep them as customers and they will move on. Independents, though not as constricted as chain store locations in what they can and cannot sell or say to customers, also have to ensure that their product and presentation remains a desirable one.

When the dynamics in independent bookstores can be likened to those in strip clubs and sex tourism sites, it points to problematic power relations in consumer behavior and attitudes I

have previously held up as ideal. Just as sex workers and exotic dancers attract attention and pity and are also marginalized by the vulnerability that is seen as inherent in their professions, bookstores are also helped and hurt by the perception that they are a dying breed in need of resuscitation and loving patronage. I would argue that independents should attempt to widen their customer base and become more inclusive. I do not believe that the benefits of a reputation for exclusivity and fragility outweigh the downsides. I do believe a large draw for many customers is the perception that their patronage “makes a difference” on a visible, tangible level for the stores they choose to frequent. This willingness of smaller establishments to acknowledge dependence gives people the opportunity to feel needed and important. While this may lead to a certain level of self-importance on the part of the “loyal customer,” in the bookstore setting, unlike the environments of strip clubs or sex-scapes, the power plays do not become exploitive or frightening.

Mark, a professor at UVA, choses to shop at small stores based on whether their inventory interests him. While the atmosphere and staff might add to his shopping experience, his ultimate criteria in whether to continue to patronize a store or go somewhere else is in whether the books in stock are ones he’s interested in reading and in whether the book buyer can manage to keep surprising him in offering new and interesting titles. He said that he used to go to Chapters (a small bookstore near Metro Center which specializes in literature and poetry but is in decline) but that now, with its huge reduction of stock and forlorn atmosphere, it “...deserves to die and there’s no reason to keep it in business.”

Such a callous attitude may seem strange in contrast to some of the other interviewees idealistic appreciation of small stores, but I think Mark raises a valuable point. For most stores, business cannot depend on offering interesting, esoteric titles, because those do not necessarily yield enough of a profit. After all, as Miller points out, larger chain stores will have the independents beat almost every time in terms of sheer number of books, even if they are not the most diverse. The majority of the books that independents stock will be ones that customers

could also find at a chain store or on the internet. Thus their ability to pique and hold their customers interest has to involve something more than the product sold.

Independent bookstores must develop ways of offering other, less tangible social goods and services that chains might not be able or willing to provide. Yet while goods of the intangible sort may be viewed as the best kind, they can also be problematic. What does an endless performance of love leave the Dominican sex workers with when their customers are gone or no longer interested? And how can independent bookstores and their employees embody an ideal commercial setting without becoming implicated in the transactions themselves? When status and legitimacy are being slipped in between pages along with a receipt, do independent bookstores really preserve what they claim?

Rod, Bridge Street's longtime manager and book buyer, a renowned spoken word poet, and the publisher of a small press, Edge Books, told me that he continued to work at Bridge Street "because it's supportive of everything else I do." As the book buyer, he has the power and authority necessary to ensure that Bridge Street carries the types of books he believes in, even if these diverge sharply from the mainstream and what most bookstores would consider "sellable." Under his management, Bridge Street's poetry section typically brings in as much revenue as does its literary fiction. While this statistic seems unheard of, Rod asserted that it makes sense, because "there are way more people interested in buying avant-garde poetry than there are places to buy it."

Such a willingness to supply what others cannot get elsewhere, however, involves taking a considerable risk, one that many booksellers would not be willing to take. Yet for the employee, choosing to sell books *they* think are important changes things. And for the patron, knowing that they can go into a store and have an interaction with someone who loves what they do instead of someone who is marginalized by it can change things as well. Or, more practically, we can say it has the potential to do so.

XIV. Flinging wide the doors: independent bookstores and the end of elitism

Yet if we want more people to have the opportunity to participate in these key interactions, and in so doing, become readers in a real and lifelong way, we need to think about how bookstores can become particular but not exclusive, selecting their books and drawing in their customers with care, but not marginalizing those who have not had the blessings of higher education, book-filled childhoods, and large disposable incomes. “Reading is both a reflection of disparate education levels and a way of bridging the differences among them.”²⁰ Small booksellers are in a unique position to facilitate the changes necessary to mitigate disparities in cultural capital, but only if they so choose. Currently, these sites of interaction and positive identity building are not, in fact, open to all. What is so charming about the ambiance of the bookshop is that every one there seems to *belong*, but what if more people could be interpellated into that sense of well-being and ease?

It does not seem to be such a momentous and arduous task to convince people to read, yet reports such as the National Endowment for the Arts study suggest that the battle may be uphill. Although paperback books are cheap, certainly much cheaper than all the other entertainment equipment in most American homes, people feel awkward about reading. This discomfort does not only arise from the books themselves, rather it is the whole wonderful and terrible milieu in which literature is placed in our society. At the same time, reading has the potential to free people from their fixed socio-economic orbits and catapult them (at least temporarily) into new ways of looking at the world. Thus, it is extremely unfortunate that books’ popularity declines with income and education level. While sponsoring literacy campaigns and boosting the role of reading in schools are two important tacts to take, I believe another avenue toward increased readership has to lie with altering the way people consume books. Literacy is an essential

²⁰ *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. Research Division Report #46. National Endowment for the Arts, June 2004. p. 1.

characteristic of a well-informed, questioning society. Bookstores depend on it, but they also can and should work to foster it.

XV. Obstacles to the open door

Again and again in my fieldwork, customers and purveyors emphasized how much *pleasure* they derived from their experiences among books. Independent booksellers and their patrons can go on for hours about a particular novel or philosophical text, or the way they felt when they first discovered their favorite author. For both buyer and seller, these discussions are enriching emotionally and intellectually. The same can not be said for the majority of interactions that occur under corporate auspices and supervision. At larger bookstores, company policy constrains these kinds of exchanges, lack of training makes them difficult, and customers' harried attitudes all combine to prevent staff from being more involved in encouraging reading. Employees are not permitted the leeway to spend 45 minutes searching for just the right book for someone's great-uncle, nor are they allowed to take initiative and engage with customers on topics not related to making a sale.

Other outlets of literature, such as public, school, and university libraries, present similar obstacles to those who do not consider reading to be an integral part of their identity. In these settings, books are more like tools to be used, though their function for many is largely restricted to the academic environment. Those who feel alienated in such settings due to inexperience or lack of success in them will probably not begin to patronize them of their own volition. While libraries, especially public ones, can do much to engage their communities as readers through story hours, book groups, and community-wide reads, certain demographics may continue to feel excluded by or disinterested in what they have to offer.

Suggestions for Booksellers

Independent bookstore customers benefit from the knowledge and expertise of book buyers and salespeople without feeling pressured to make a sale or choose the “right” book. They are allowed to browse aimlessly or purposefully, and the diversity and scope of their interests is usually met with enthusiasm. In a bookstore, a positive identity can be created, or a much needed bit of downtime seized. Yet how many non-readers will actually enter these stores and find out that such opportunities exist? As a bookstore employee, I have seen many people enter the store, gaze at the shelves nervously, and sheepishly exit. Is this because we do not sell anything they are interested in, because they do not know how to ask, or because we are failing in our task of engagement?

I would argue that often the answer is a mixture of the latter two possibilities: even in a small store such as Bridge Street, I believe everyone could find at least *one* book that might speak to them. But the problem of accessibility remains: how can we empower people to see themselves as readers? First on the agenda is an increased community orientation from bookstores. Purveyors should not focus solely on the upper echelons of society, but strive to fling wide their doors and welcome everyone in. This does not mean that the inventory needs to be altered to suit those with less “refined” tastes, rather it demands that more small bookstores exist within more communities and that they receive support as purveyors of both intellectual and social goods.

Second, we need to re-think some of our long held preferences and prejudices regarding the kinds of environments where we feel the most comfortable and at ease. If validation can only come from participation in bounded and exclusive communities, we are not as confident and self-assured as we seem. Both independent booksellers and their patrons have a tremendous amount of knowledge and cultural capital at their disposal, but by only allowing it to circulate in

carefully contained sites, they are denying others a chance at growth and educational opportunity. If we believe that books can knock down boundaries, we must also be committed to eliminating them ourselves.

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