Another world is possible: reconceptualizing the "safe space" metaphor at a feminist safer space in New York City



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A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Trinity 2021

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the following people who have helped me undertake this research and see it come to fruition: Dr Robert Parkin ("bob") for never wanting to "cramp my style" and for allowing me to follow my intuition and change research topics; the late Professor Marcus Banks, who willingly offered to supervise me when I was without a supervisor; Dr Zuzanna Olszewska for agreeing to supervise me at the end of my degree, helping me "get over the line," and pushing me both intellectually and creatively; Dr Elizabeth Ewart and Dr Thomas Hendriks, whose feedback from my Confirmation of Status proved invaluable; Professor David Gellner and my ISCA DPhil cohort for their encouragement and insights during my Work in Progress Seminar; and everyone who attended my presentations at the IGS Seminar Series at Lady Margaret Hall, who made me feel like my research was poignant and valuable. I am indebted to everyone at the bookstore who shared their lives with me graciously, trusted me to share their stories, and encouraged me to challenge myself.

This degree was not without obstacles, and I was plagued by doubt, illness, and at times, hopelessness. Interrupted supervision in tandem with an invisible (and for years, undiagnosed) chronic health condition meant that I felt like I was falling behind; despite my faith in my intellectual and academic abilities, I nevertheless felt like a burden to this institution and wondered if putting aside the DPhil would be a better option for me than seeing it through. I cannot express my gratitude enough for my college advisor at St Hilda's, Dr Margaret Kean, for listening to me, assuring me that my experiences were not my fault, and for escalating my situation to college and to my department. I whole-heartedly appreciate Professor Kerstin Hoge, who made me feel supported by college, and who ensured that I would have both supervision and extensions to finish this degree. Thank you to Mary Smith, Mel Goodchild, and Vicky Dean for providing swift and non-judgmental administrative and academic support over the years, as well as to Jo Aldhouse for supporting me in all things visa related. I am also grateful for the friendship and solidarity with two DPhil students in particular, Susana and Alice, who made me feel less alone in my struggles. I would also like to thank Dr Tim Knowlson, Tom Anstey, and Meryem for regularly checking in on me (especially when my Junior Dean job was trying), encouraging me to look after myself, and reassuring me that I always had someone to turn to.

Writing would not have been possible this past year without the ongoing weekly support of Dr Eleanor Pritchard and everyone in our virtual writing group. I am also grateful to everyone at St Hilda's who made my life easier, especially the catering and housekeeping teams, our porters, Mani, Sarah, and everyone's favorite cat, Teabag. Thank you to the students at St Hilda's who inspired me to keep pushing through hard times and who showed me gratitude for my work as Junior Dean, too.

As challenging as this degree was, these years were also full of laughter, play, and bonding. The friendships I have formed and strengthened over the years will stay with me forever, and I will be eternally grateful for the people I have met along the way. My first year Kellogg College cohort made me realize Oxford was about more than just studying, and I still look back on that year as one of the greatest of my life. Draŝko, from our Rad Cam writing sessions to nearly missing our flight in Spain to our food frenzies, you are like the Peeta to my Katniss, and I cannot imagine these years without you. Rowing and life chats with Kate, lunches at Kellogg College with the usuals, impromptu *Harry Potter* viewings in bed with David and Freya, and feminist musings (read: rants) with Anna were regular fixtures that brought a smile to my face. I have learned so much from my youngest but wisest friend, Maddie. I cannot imagine my experience at Oxford without my dance friends, especially my dance partner, Solly, and my old-married-partner/Exec PA, Alex. Robynne, Em, Zoë, Grace, Christoph, and Jordan, the way you live inspires me to be unapologetically me, to celebrate ourselves, and to rest. Rory made me feel like I had a friend during fieldwork and inspired me examine daily life more critically (academia, too). And, of course, I am so lucky to have my oldest friends, who have been with me and believed in me since the beginning, especially Kelly, Katelyn, Rachel, and Karina, who never doubted me even when I doubted myself.

Finishing a DPhil during a pandemic was not easy, but a few people made life feel a little more normal. Daisy and Isobel, I am so grateful for our weekly "coven" dinners (even when I made us sit outside in the rain), for you listening to my voice notes (even at 1.5x speed), and for giving each other reasons to laugh. I am lucky to have been through these past sixteen months with my partner, László, who has been my oasis in this desert. Thank you for listening to my ideas, helping me with all things tech even when you had your own things to do, encouraging me to stand up for myself, and for always making my coffee.

I am fortunate to have a supportive family who would do anything to make my dreams come true. A special thanks to my Aunt Carolyn, Uncle Ted, Glenn, Alice, Hank, Lucille, Lil, Debbie, Chelsea, Emma, Sophia, Starbuck, and Tiffany (who is much more like a sister than a cousin, and who always visits me, no matter where I live). There are not enough words to express my gratitude to my mom and Jeff, who saw me through late homework nights when I was in school, showed me around university campuses when I was a kid, and encouraged me to pursue hobbies, too. Your sacrifices and encouragement have kept me going and have made this DPhil possible, which was not a one-time event, but the cumulation of years of your continued support. Mom, this thesis is for you. Thank you for believing in me, for advocating for me, and for showing me that injustice can always be contested, even when it is not easy. We made it.

Undoubtedly, I am leaving this thesis as a changed person, and saying goodbye to this process is bittersweet. I am thankful for this whole experience—for the resilience I have built, for the writer I have become, for the friendships I have forged along the way, and for the critical anthropological perspective I have nurtured. Even though this experience was challenging and I do not know what will come next, I feel prepared to take on just about anything. In the words of Ariana Grande: Thank you, next.

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GLOSSARY

ableism – *noun*

discrimination and prejudice (implicit and explicit) towards people with disabilities

accessibility – *noun*

when the needs of those with disabilities are considered/prioritized; or, more broadly when the needs of those who are marginalized are considered/prioritized in effort to mitigate and/or eliminate barriers to services, facilities, buildings, etc.

affirmative consent – *noun*

a model of consent that emphasizes enthusiastic, positive, and freely-given agreement

agender – *adjective*

an orientation that describes a lack of gender; genderless

aromantic – *adjective*

an orientation that describes a lack of romantic attraction

asexual – *adjective*

an orientation that describes a lack of sexual attraction

bottom-liner – *noun*

a word used by the Pocketbooks community to describe workers who are responsible for ensuring that tasks are completed; similar to "manager," but with horizontal connotations; related to signing off on the "bottom line" of something

cancel culture—*noun*

a cultural phenomenon associated with "canceling" people, institutions, brands, or programs, usually due to something objectionable that they have said or done; a means of withdrawing support publicly; a term typically invoked with negative connotations

cisgender – *adjective*; cis (shorthand)

when a person's gender "corresponds" with the sex (and gender) assigned at birth (i.e., someone who identifies as a woman and was assigned girl at birth due to having female reproductive organs)

cishet – *adjective*

shorthand to describe someone cisgender and heterosexual

cissexism – *noun*

discrimination and prejudice towards transgender, non-binary, and/or gender nonconforming people, or that which affirms the gender binary at the expense of those who do not conform to cisgender expectations

cisheterosexism – noun

discrimination and prejudice at the intersection of cissexism and heterosexism

deadnaming – *verb*

to use someone's given (or former) name without their consent instead of their chosen name

gender binary – *noun*

a system that classifies gender as a distinct, two-part system: men (masculine) and women (feminine)

genderfluid – adjective

having a gender identity that shifts over time

gender neutral – *adjective*

avoiding cultural biases that favor sex and/or gender (e.g., gender neutral language, gender neutral clothing, gender neutral parenting, gender neutral bathrooms, etc.)

gender nonconforming – *adjective*

a broad term to describe when someone's gender expression or behavior does not conform to society's expectations (in Western cultures, the gender binary)

genderqueer – *adjective*

when someone's gender identity does not conform to society's expectations (in Western cultures, the gender binary)

heterosexism – *noun*

discrimination and prejudice towards people who are not heterosexual

intersectional – *adjective*

a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe how race, gender, class, and other systems of power intersect to form experiences of inequality

kyriarchy – *noun*

a complex system comprised of intersecting structures of domination, oppression, and subordination

microaggression – *noun*

an act of everyday structural violence, often those which are subtle or unintentional

misgender – *verb*

to use incorrect pronouns for someone

neurotypical – *adjective*

a description for those who meet standard developmental and cognitive expectations; widely used (but not exclusively) for non-autistic people

neurodivergent – *adjective*

a description for those who do not meet standard developmental and cognitive expectations, or thinks differently than what society considers "normal"; widely used for autistic people, but also for those who have ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette's, and other cognitive variations

no-platforming—*verb*

a form of boycott, often in university settings, where the invitation for a public figure to speak at an institution or venue is withdrawn (i.e., their "platform" is withheld); a term associated with freedom of speech debates

nonbinary – *adjective*

not identifying with the gender binary

pangender – *adjective*

a multi-gender identity that can encompass identifying with multiple identities at once or over time

pansexual – *adjective*

a sexual identity for someone who experiences sexual, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to people regardless of their gender or sex

passing – *adjective*

when a person can appear to meet societal expectations or blend in, despite not belonging to the structure of power that re(produces) those expectations, and may therefore receive less structural violence but may also be rendered invisible (e.g., a "white passing" person may be a light-skinned person of color; a "straight passing" bisexual may be someone bisexual in a heterosexual relationship; a trans person who "passes" may have a gender expression that other people would read as cisgender)

polyamorous – *adjective*

having multiple intimate, sexual, and/or romantic relationships; non-monogamous; often discussed in the framework of "ethical non-monogamy"

privilege – *noun*

rights or special allowances granted to those belong to and benefit from structures of power (e.g., white privilege, straight privilege, class privilege)

transgender – *adjective*; trans (shorthand)

someone whose gender (identify and/or expression) is different than their assigned gender/sex at birth *and* identifies with this term (e.g., a woman who was assigned male at birth)

transmisogyny – *noun*

discrimination and prejudice enacted towards trans women

transmisogynyoir – *noun*

discrimination and prejudice enacted towards black trans women

trigger warning – *noun*

a warning given for information, material, or content that may detail instances of violence and/or may exacerbate PTSD symptoms

ABSTRACT

My thesis seeks to reconceptualize the "safe space" metaphor at a self-described "safer space" in New York City, Pocketbooks. Typically understood as places of comfort, safe spaces are often disparaged for encouraging emotional fragility and stymying intellectual growth. However, the potential of sites like these to offer cultural critique and provoke new ways of thinking about safety (and violence) has been overlooked. Pocketbooks, a feminist bookstore in a hyper-gentrifying neighborhood of Manhattan, is one such place. Although Mayor Giuliani's "quality of life" laws are often credited for making NYC the safest it has ever been, Pocketbooks positions itself as a "safer space" from a city (and society) that has become increasingly *un*safe.

With a view to (re)conceptualizing safe spaces and interrogating the meaning(s) of safety in neoliberal America, my thesis posits the following ethnographic question: How does the Pocketbooks community (re)imagine, negotiate, and enact notions of safety to build a micro-society that is, in their words, "equitable, cooperative, and free?" Integrating fifteen months of fieldwork with a variety of literatures—including but not limited to the anthropologies of violence and counterpublics—I attempt to reconceptualize the safe space metaphor. I argue that Pocketbooks act as a feminist counterpublic whereby people of subordinated and sociospatially-excluded populations can find community and self-expression, acquire skills to reduce the extent of their marginalization elsewhere, develop language to articulate their identities and experiences, and even unlearn violent habitus. Moreover, in an attempt to translate utopian imaginaries into practice, Pocketbooks becomes a place to think *from* and *about* safety, and a place to consider how to forge justice in an unequal world. My research challenges the dominant discourse that neglects the structural nature of violence and overlooks safe spaces as creative sites of cultural critique and production, contestation, and hope.

Word count: 92,990

CHAPTER 1 | INTRODUCTION

(1) INTRODUCING MY RESEARCH

(1.1) POCKETBOOKS, A "SAFER SPACE" IN NEW YORK CITY

"Is it okay if I touch you?" Bree's question catches me off guard. It is just past 9 a.m. on a wintry Saturday morning, and the low sun pierces through the windowpanes of Pocketbooks, a collectively run feminist bookstore on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where bookshelves have been wheeled to the sides of the shop to make room for a self-defense class.

No workout or self-defense instructor has ever checked in before prodding me or altering my physical stance, but I should have expected Bree's question. Pocketbooks is a "safer space," after all; the Safer Space Policy is posted on the wall behind where I'm standing, and one of the first guidelines is, "Respect everyone's physical and emotional boundaries." The self-defense workshop is part of an ongoing series intended to help cultivate the bookstore as a safer space. For the next two hours, the bookshop is open exclusively to people who feel vulnerable to gender-based harassment and abuse—women, transgender, and/or non-binary people—to learn self-defense in a safe environment, free of charge. Pocketbooks volunteers will not open the store for business until 11 a.m., but that does not stop window-shoppers from glancing at some of the street-facing top sellers: *Feminism is for everybody*, by bell hooks; *Men explain things to Me*, by Rebecca Solnit; *Against equality: queer revolution, not mere inclusion,* published by AK Press; *Between the world and me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

I nod to Bree, expressing my consent for her to enter my physical space. She adjusts my pose and says, “That’s better. This pose says, ‘You want to pass? Okay, but you’ll have to come through me first.” She encourages the other participants who stand before her, who are inflicted with a timidity that mirrors my own. “Don’t be afraid to occupy your space,” she says. “Show me it’s yours.”

During a pause in the workshop, Bree shares with us that growing up as a lesbian in homophobic neighborhood in Queens, she had self-defense training “beaten into her.” During her teenage years, she tells us, the Lower East Side, West Village, and East Village of Manhattan acted as her queer stomping ground, a reprieve from the familiar beatings. She says, “It was our safe space…. but walking here to the West Village holding my girlfriend’s hand feels like an act of transgression nowadays.”

Bree grabs her punching bag, placing it before me. “Take up space,” she tells us. “Reclaim it as yours.”

I turn to face her and make note of Pocketbooks’ storefront window, which has “We are a safer space” written in teal, uppercase decal lettering. Slightly hesitant, I put my fists in front of me. *I am in a safe space*, I remind myself, and punch the bag. I may not be the next Muhammad Ali, but with every strike, I gain a little more confidence.

(1.2) MY RESEARCH FOCUS AND QUESTIONS

I daresay that for most academics in the US or UK, the phrase “safe space” conjures some kind image of university students today, and quite possibly an unfavorable one at that. In university settings, safe spaces tend to be discussed in the same breath as cancel culture

(and/or "PC culture"), trigger warnings, and no-platforming; most often, they are disparaged as a reflection of the fragile "snowflake" generation who are intolerant to ideas they dislike and who prioritize protecting feelings over free speech. A widely-circulated article in *The Atlantic* goes as far as saying that safe spaces pose a threat to academic job security: "The debate over academic freedom and the desire to make students feel welcome leaves professors' job security in a precarious limbo" (Bateman, 2016). In 2016, the Dean of the University of Chicago wrote a letter to incoming freshman, announcing that the university would not tolerate the creation of safe spaces due to the university's dedication to "freedom of enquiry and expression" (Ellison, 2016). Even President Obama has waded into the safe space debate, saying that when you become a student you do not "have to be coddled and protected from different points of view"—the implication being, of course, that safe spaces coddle students, shield them from new ideas, and stifle intellectual enquiry. In this pervasive narrative, safe spaces are juxtaposed with values that academia—and Western culture(s) more broadly—hold dear: rigor of debate, emotional and intellectual resilience, and freedom of speech.

Despite the fervor of these debates, however, "safe space" has become an "overused but undertheorized metaphor" (Barrett, 2010: 1). Not only are the arguments that comprise the safe space discourse mostly made without empirical support (and without the consideration of those who initiate and participate in these spaces), but a critical examination of safety—including safe *from what, for whom, and for what purpose* safe spaces are initiated—are overlooked entirely. Moreover, because the bulk of the safe space discourse has focused on their role within universities, their history—which can be traced to gay bars and feminist consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s and 1970s (Kenney,

2001)—has been obscured, as have their (often-explicitly stated) liberatory missions, and the contemporary (neoliberal) context in which they have proliferated. As such, not only are the accusations launched against safe spaces without empirical backing, but the potential for safe spaces to be viewed as places that offer cultural critique about the ways in which we think about safety has gone unheeded.

For example, Pocketbooks, the feminist bookstore and safer space from the chapter's opening vignette, has a Safer Space Policy that is explicitly coupled with a political Mission Statement. The statement, posted online and in store, asserts the aim "to empower all people to challenge oppression and participate in creating a society which is equitable, cooperative, and free" and to provide "an example of the society we are working toward." Building the shop as a safer space is directly positioned as a strategy for emancipation and freedom, as a means of prefiguring an ideal, egalitarian society. Moreover, implicit in the assertion that Pocketbooks is a *safe(r)* space is that the society in which they are embedded is *un*safe. And yet, New York City is now considered the safest it has ever been. In the most basic sense, crime reduction statistics seemingly support this narrative. Under Giuliani's leadership in the 1990s, due to his "quality of life" policies, violent crime rates dropped by 56 percent compared to 28 percent nationally, property crimes fell 65 percent when only down 26 percent nationally (Francis, 2003), and both homicide and robbery declined by around two thirds (Allison, 2007). However, as Bree's commentary at the outset of this chapter suggests, rather than conceptualizing the city as transforming from unsafe to safe, as a lesbian, she expresses a *loss* of safety. So, what made the city feel safer to her before Giuliani's reign, and why has the city's reduction in crime made her old neighborhoods now feel unsafe? What did she mean when she called her gay neighborhood a "safe space," and why does she

feel the need to create and participate in a safe spaces like Pocketbooks nowadays? It is evident that according to the Pocketbooks community, "safe" means something other than freedom from crime.

My main research question is both modest and bold: "What does it mean for a place to act as a 'safe space'?" Although the question of whether safe spaces are conducive to learning and intellectual debate can still be evaluated, I aim to take one step back and develop a more nuanced conceptualization of safe spaces (which enables us to consider their applicability in a multitude of settings). Ethnographically, I consider the "how": How does the Pocketbooks community (re)imagine, negotiate, and enact notions of safety to build a micro-society that is, in their words, "equitable, cooperative, and free?" In reconceptualizing the safe space metaphor, I provoke a more theoretical question, too: What does it mean to be *safe?* This question is not only positioned toward the ontological or philosophical. Embracing anthropology as an opportunity to engage in cultural critique at "home" (see: Marcus and Fischer, 1986), I also aim to interrogate, examine, and (re)theorize the foundations of a concept (i.e., safety) that might otherwise go unexamined, but nevertheless informs our everyday lived experiences, the geographies we inhabit, and the institutions that shape the contours of society. My approach is premised on the argument that "[c]ultural critique makes anthropology the most radical of disciplines because we challenge preconceptions and assumptions more than anyone else" (McGuire and Sheridan, 2019: 6).

My chosen field site to think through and with these questions is Pocketbooks, a mission-driven feminist bookstore, café, event space, and most importantly, self-declared "safer space," on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where I carried out fifteen months of fieldwork (July 2015 - September 2016). Its location in Manhattan allows me to explore the

social, historic, cultural, and spatial phenomena that motivate the community to construct a safer space in New York City and to contextualize safe spaces in a wider context. Based on the recognition that both space and safety are socially produced—and therefore the possibilities for safety and liberation are not arbitrary but the result of social, spatial, temporal, and historic processes—the community at Pocketbooks considers a multitude of ways in which space can be manipulated to create a safer space. As such, my ethnographic chapters explore multiple aspects of safe space and place-making at Pocketbooks: ideals and aspirations; objects, spatial boundaries, and bodies; behavioral norms, communication, and practices; and social organization.

Unlike much of the contemporary discourse surrounding safe spaces, my aim is not to debate for or against the practice of creating such spaces. Although I will explore the ways in which volunteers at the bookstore weigh their experiences of safety and unsafety at Pocketbooks on their own terms, my aim is to better understand the complex relationships between safety, space, and justice; ideals and practice; and the challenges and possibilities that emerge in attempting to realize a safe space in an "unsafe" world.

This chapter covers significant ground and aims to redirect the (often misplaced) narrative surrounding safe spaces. First, I will focus on how the "safe space" metaphor has unfolded primarily in higher education contexts—not because I believe safe spaces should primarily be evaluated in this context, but because that is where the bulk of the discourse currently resides. Second, I introduce several literatures to help reconceptualize the metaphor, including but not limited to a brief genealogy of safe spaces, an introduction to literature on feminist counterpublics, and a discussion of the anthropology of violence. I also introduce the notion of a "risk society" and how conceptualizations of danger, risk, and

safety unfold socially and spatially in the contemporary (neoliberal) American context. Next, I restate my research questions, discuss why Pocketbooks is the ideal field site for critically evaluating safe spaces and safety, explore the significance of my research, and propose an exciting proposition: an anthropology of safety. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a thesis overview.

(1.3) TERMINOLOGY

Terminology is an important aspect of interaction and activities within the bookshop, much of which is unfamiliar to the general public (or, if recognized, is often misunderstood and/or misused). Accordingly, this thesis includes a glossary with some of the most frequently used terms and phrases at Pocketbooks. Most of this vocabulary relates to sexuality and gender (e.g., cisgender, transgender, genderfluid, asexual, aromantic, gender neutral) or to safe spaces practices (e.g., trigger warning, microaggression). I will define key words and concepts in text when needed, but the glossary illustrates the breadth of vocabulary that safe spaces produce and utilize and suggests that they can even be seen as speech communities in the sense used by linguistic anthropologists.

Throughout my thesis, I will use the terms "safe space" and "safer space" interchangeably, as they denote the same types of places. "Safe space" is the more common, colloquial phrase in mainstream discussions and in academic literature. Some of these places, however, prefer the term "safer spaces"—as Pocketbooks does—because it acknowledges that although places can be made saf*er*, total safety is a utopian imaginary that can never fully be realized. I am inclined to use "safer space" when referencing

Pocketbooks because of the community's preference for the phrase, but I will also refer to "safe spaces" because of the phrase's ubiquity in literature, the media, and general discourse. I do not intend to make a theoretical or empirical point when referencing one over the other, except to highlight the ways in which the Pocketbooks community is self-reflexive in their use of language and in conceptualizing their own project.

As my research question suggests, there is no universal understanding of what it means to be a "safe space." Nevertheless, having a starting point is still useful as a springboard for more robust theorization. Boostrom (1998), one of the first academics to reflect upon safe spaces being used as a pedagogical strategy, provides an initial conceptualization. Boostrom (1998) suggests we think about "safe space" as a metaphor. He says, "The 'space' or 'place' can be literal or figurative. So some papers talk about a 'safe house', others about a 'safe conversation'. The safety can be from physical or psychic harm" (Boostrom, 1998: 399). Most invocations of the phrase, he adds, are "concerned with psychic benefits, not physical harms. And [they are] concerned with the injuries that individuals suffer at the hands of society" (Boostrom, 1998: 399).

By contrast, The Roestone Collective (2014) offers a more explicitly political definition. They write that safe spaces developed from activist movements with the intention to protect marginalized communities from violence (rather than simply "psychic harm," as Boostrom [1998: 399] called it). This definition more closely resembles my own understanding of the term and invites us to unpack the meaning of violence, too. They write:

> In feminist, queer, and civil rights movements an understanding of safe space has developed that is associated with keeping marginalized groups free from violence and harassment. This type of safe space also encourages 'a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance' (Kenney, 2001: 24). (The Roestone Collective, 2014: 1347)

In my thesis, I tend to use the acronym LGBTQ or LGBTQ+ when referring to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community. People at Pocketbooks used both acronyms, as well as LGBTQIA+ (to include additional references to intersex and asexual identities). Occasionally, I use "LGBT," but only when referring to literature that has explicitly uses that acronym. LGBT is often considered a more outdated acronym, as it is often seen less inclusive (for not having an umbrella category like "queer"), but there is no universally "right" or accepted acronym.

Finally, space is both a word and concept that I invoke throughout this thesis (as do my participants). While my references to space often carry different connotations (which I will highlight when relevant), Lefebvre's spatial triad helps think through types of space while also reconciling and transcending the space/place divide (see: Merrifield, 1993). According to Lefebvre (1991), "spatial practice" is a type of perceived space, characterized by (re)production, materiality, and location. Next "representation of space" ties in with visions and conceptualization of space, such as by architects and planners, for example. Finally, "representational space" or "lived space" is that which gives and is given meaning by people and is both molded and (re)fitted by those who inhabit or interact with it. These concepts do not represent three distinct types or even aspects of space; they are in a continuous dialogue with one another.

(2) SAFE SPACE DISCOURSE

(2.1) "AGAINST STUDENTS," AGAINST SAFE SPACES: DOMINANT PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND UNIVERSITIES

In the US and UK especially, safe spaces have garnered attention from several audiences: mainstream media, government officials, university figures, and the entertainment industry (the popular animated televisions series, South Park, even aired an episode in 2015 called "Safe Space"). An influential article, "The Coddling of the American Mind," published by Lukainoff and Haidt in *The Atlantic* (2015), summarizes the hegemonic safe space narrative. They write that the safe space "movement":

> …presumes an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche, and therefore elevates the goal of protecting students from psychological harm. The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into 'safe spaces' where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable. (Lukainoff & Haidt, 2015)

Their argument that comfort is the "ultimate aim" of safe spaces is predicated on their observations of two practices common in safe spaces: trigger warnings (warnings given in advance of discussing sensitive topics, such as sexual violence, racism, and genocide) and raising awareness of microaggressions, which they define as "subtle, often unconscious racial affronts" (2015). Trigger warnings, they suggest, harm students by catering to their emotional fragility; the "real world" will not accommodate their needs and trauma(s), so the university should not either. Meanwhile, they argue that the seriousness of microaggressions is overstated—microaggressions, they claim, are a "magnification," or an "exaggerate[ion of] the importance of things" (2015). They even suggest that raising awareness of microaggressions is a "collegiate trend"—implying that university students do not think for themselves and "focus on small or accidental slights," rather than genuine instances of harm

(2015). Rhetorically (and perhaps, patronizingly), they question the resilience of students today:

> What are we doing to our students if we encourage them to develop extra-thin skin in the years just before they leave the cocoon of adult protection and enter the workforce? Would they not be better prepared to flourish if we taught them to question their own emotional reactions, and to give people the benefit of the doubt? (Lukainoff & Haidt, 2015)

Implicit in their argument are several assumptions, including but not limited to: (i) safety can be reduced to emotional comfort (and affects, like comfort, can be understood without being contextualized within structures of power); (ii) students who demand safety do not experience "real" violence; (iii) safe spaces can be fully evaluated by looking at trigger warnings and microaggressions; (iv) resilience is best built by continued exposure to harm; and (v) universities should not attempt to be more compassionate to students than the "real world." Moreover, at the heart of this argument is the belief that students are the problem. This attitude is embodied in a tweet by Richard Dawkins, fellow of New College at the University of Oxford, which reads, "A university is not a 'safe space.' If you need a safe space, leave, go home, hug your teddy & suck your thumb until ready for university" (Dawkins, 2015). In an online cartoon (see *Figure 1* below) a university is sketched to mimic a crib, and a university student sits in the middle. The student is wearing a diaper, sucking a pacifier, and holding up a sign "Stay out of my #safe space!" Not only are safe spaces publicly criticized, but students who call for them are mocked, dismissed, and framed as the aggressors.



Figure 1: sourced from (Thwaite, 2016)

In addition to suggesting that students are coddled, prominent voices in the dominant discourse allege that safe spaces impinge on free speech, which is dangerous in any setting, but especially in a classroom, where scholars must be free to exchange ideas. Outspoken safe space critics contend that when a classroom is a "safe space," students and professors must constantly be aware of their peers' emotional states; as such, discussion and debate will be restricted, leading to the decline of academic rigor and intellectual progress. This argument is explicit in a letter that John Ellison, Dean at the University of Chicago, wrote to incoming freshmen in 2016. He writes:

> You will find that we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate, discussion, and even disagreement. At times this may challenge you and even cause discomfort. Our commitment to academic freedom means…. we do not condone the creation of intellectual 'safe spaces' where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own. (Ellison, 2016)

Louise Richardson, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford, goes one step further in her disdain for safe spaces, suggesting that they actively encourage a culture of censorship and prevent the free exchange of ideas:

> Those who want safe spaces are trying to restrict the expression of views they find reprehensible and universities are precisely the places where we should hear views that are objectionable, whether they're from extremists or on the other hand from the students that find them objectionable. (see Richardson's comments: Merrick, 2016)

A sampling of major media headlines expresses the wave of panic surrounding safe spaces across the US and UK: "Safe space or free speech? The crisis around debate at UK universities" (Dunt, 2015); "University 'safe space' policies leave academics in fear of losing their jobs, claims professor" (Pells, 2017); and "The Tyranny of Safe Spaces" (Slater, 2016). Lukainoff and Haidt (2015) go as far as suggesting safe spaces "are bad for American Democracy," because they do not foster respect and compromise. In the UK, *Spiked Online* has launched a website entitled, The Free Speech University Rankings (FSUR), a "groundbreaking analysis of campus censorship in the UK," where universities are ranked based on their students' and student unions' safe space policies (see: "Free Speech University Rankings! - a spiked campaign"). The more a university adopts safe space policies and follows practices associated with them, the more censorious they are ranked. Berkowitz (2016), one of the few people who has publicly defended safe spaces in the media, summarizes the message of these articles: if "universities don't make a stand against this foolishness, Western Civilization itself will collapse" (2016). Safe spaces are portrayed as undesirable at best, a threat to society at worst.

While this second line of argumentation about free speech is an extension of the argument that students are hypersensitive (for instance, this idea that students need to

"retreat from ideas" resonates with the claim that students are intellectually and emotionally frail), there is notable contradiction in the portrayal of students. While Lukainoff and Haidt (2015), Dawkins (2015), and others first depict students as weak, too feeble to handle the *real* world, in this second argument, students are depicted as censorious menaces who pose a serious threat to universities, American democracy, and even Western Civilization. These conflicting attitudes about students who initiate safe spaces are mirrored in other media outlets, too. An illustration on the cover of *The Spectator* (see: O'Neill, 2014) depicts zombie-like students wearing t-shirts with text on them, "This is what a feminist looks like," staring into the reader with glowing yellow, pupil-less eyes—resembling a pack of monsters in a horror film (see *Figure 2* below). The title of the article is "Free speech is so last century. Today's students want the 'right to be comfortable'" (O'Neill, 2014).



Figure 2: sourced from (O'Neill, 2014)

While these images send conflicting messages (are students babies or authoritarian monsters?), students are positioned as the antagonists. Ahmed (2015) labels this attitude—in which students are framed as the problem without taking their concerns seriously—"against students." Ahmed has also dubbed the controversy about safe spaces a "moral panic about a moral panic" because of the way in which the potential dangers of safe spaces to universities are exaggerated (2015).

While it is admirable that academics do not want intellectual debate compromised (if we grant a generous interpretation), we ought to consider whose freedom of speech and expression may *already* be jeopardized. Are classrooms truly neutral, power-free spaces in which speech flows freely, as their arguments imply? Ellsworth (1989), for example, who writes from a background in critical pedagogy, argues that the idea of free dialogue is a fallacy because power relations along lines of race, class, and gender are unbalanced and therefore unjust. Free speech is illusory in educational settings, argues Redmond, (2010), because cultural rules exert "concertive control" over marginalized students (2010: 6). Moreover, although free speech is a value championed in the US especially, it does not extend to speech that can incite harm to others, for example. How might safe spaces (and even protocol like trigger warnings and microaggression awareness) help us rethink what constitutes harmful or violent speech? Finally, despite the insistence that universities should mirror the "real world" (whatever that means), we should ask ourselves, "Why?" If universities are meant to lead new ways of thinking and strive for *more* than what currently exists "out there," why should they not strive to be better, more compassionate places and be open to new ways of thinking about how people interact with one another?

(2.2) THEORIZING SAFE SPACE SKEPTICISM IN PEDAGOGICAL LITERATURE: SAFETY CONCEPTUALIZED AS "COMFORT" AND AS ERADICATING RISK

The academic literature on safe spaces offers some limited insight into how we might conceptualize safe spaces, safety, and understand those who practice them, but it still leaves considerable room for further research. Safe spaces have been recognized in academic literature for two decades now (see: Barrett, 2010; Boostrom, 1998; Holley and Steiner, 2005); Iversen, 2018; Redmond, 2010; Young and McKibban, 2014). Safe classrooms have been acknowledged in various teaching and learning settings, including theatre (Hunter, 2008), religious education (Geiger, 2018; Osbeck et al., 2017; Iversen, 2018, and social work (Cain, Roy, 1996; Holley and Steiner, 2005; Hyde and Ruth, 2002). Moreover, they have been recognized in various activist settings (Bullock, Truong and Chhun, 2016; Lewis et al., 2015; The Roestone Collective, 2014).

Although safe spaces have drawn the attention of researchers and academics since 1998 (see: Boostrom, 1998), they remain relatively unresearched and undertheorized. It was a dozen years after Boostrom's (1998) seminal work was published that Barrett (2010: 1) argued that the safe space metaphor lacks in-depth conceptualization despite widespread usage. At the time of my own writing, yet another decade later, most research on safe spaces still lacks an engagement with the sociospatial and historical contexts in which they are embedded, the voices of those who participate in safe spaces, and/or an observation of the process by which they are created, negotiated, and contested. Moreover, most of what exists focuses primarily on the value (or lack thereof) of safe spaces as a pedagogical strategy, rather than sites of resistance and transformative politics.

Boostrom's (1998) work on safe spaces, influenced by his background and academic

interest in education, remains influential in the safe space literature and has likely indirectly informed some of the public criticisms of safe space, too. According to Boostrom (1998), we ought to think of "safe space" as a metaphor. However, Boostrom (1998) struggles to understand the kinds of safety that students might need and want from a safe space. He writes:

> Why do some (prominent) educators believe that ordinary children in ordinary classrooms have a great need for this sort of 'safe space'? In the case of an abused child or a child with Tourette's syndrome, the need for (and nature of) safety is obvious. The need for safety from drug-related shootings' or gangs of rapists is also obvious. The school should be a safe space. But what lies behind the concern for a figurative, psychically safe space? (Boostrom, 1998: 399)

Despite not having a clear answer to this question, Boostrom (1998) argues that safe spaces aim to eliminate risk, therefore making them unsuitable for classroom learning. He writes, "Understood as the avoidance of stress, the 'safe space' metaphor drains from classroom life every impulse toward critical reflection" (1998: 406). This is because, according to Boostrom (1998), a safe space necessitates accepting everyone's comments and opinions, therefore leaving no room for criticism or contestation (1998: 407). In a dramatic closing argument, Boostrom contrasts safe spaces with Socrates' and Plato's noble pedagogical wisdom:

> A person can learn, says Socrates, if 'he is brave and does not tire of the search' (Plato: 81d). We have to be brave because along the way we are going to be 'vulnerable and exposed'; we are going to encounter images that are 'alienating and shocking. We are going to be very unsafe." (Boostrom, 1998: 407)[1]

Despite asking why educators believe that children might need a safe space, he does

[1] The edition of the text Boostrom (1990) refers to is (Plato, 1985).

not probe this question further. I argue that we *ought* to question why other children might also have special needs that might be less visible than Tourette's syndrome, for example. Moreover, much like with the arguments I presented in the previous section, Boostrom's (1998) reasoning that students cannot be criticized in a safe space is based primarily on a theoretical presumption rather than empirical observation.

Inspired by Boostrom over a decade later, Barrett (2010) further discredits the safe space metaphor as a tool for improving classroom learning. Her most impassioned argument relies on the same underlying assumption that learning requires risk and that safe classrooms aim to eliminate that risk. She argues:

> …if we accept that a central component of safety is comfort, as is suggested by the previous review of the theoretical and empirical work on safe classrooms, we must question whether the safe classroom is conducive to (or counter to) the development of students as critical thinkers." (Barrett, 2010: 6)

Barrett (2010) emphasizes that in a risk-free environment, students' emotional states must be respected at all costs, making it impossible to challenge or assess their arguments and ideas; questioning them, she assumes, might create a stressful and "unsafe" experience. A safe classroom, she argues, thus protects the individual and their subjectivities over the pursuit of scholarship. However, much like Boostrom (1998), Barrett (2010) fails to interrogate the notion of risk (and safety). In this language of risk, we might ask: What kinds of risk—if any—does a safe space aim to eliminate and why? For whom? Moreover, in practice, is it true that students are not challenged in a safe space—or is this based on a misplaced assumption?

Barrett (2010) proposes several more reasons to doubt that safe spaces enable critical thinking. For instance, she says she was unable to identify any "empirical studies in the

literature that evaluated the impact of safe space on specific educational outcomes for students" (2010: 3), leading her to doubt that they have a favorable outcome. But why should we conclude that a lack of research supports the argument that they are bad for classroom learning? Moreover, she argues that "safety" is too ambiguously defined for it to be empirically evaluated anyway; as an emotional state, it is "largely invisible and not readily observable by educators," so how can anyone know when students have had this experience (2010: 9)? While it is true that safety is ambiguously defined in the literature, that is more reason to interrogate it further. If anything, Barrett (2010) unintentionally reinforces my argument that we need more research on safe spaces, beginning with theoretical frameworks and continued through sustained empirical studies.

(3) RECONCEPTUALIZING SAFE SPACES

(3.1) MOTIVATIONS FOR A NEW FRAMEWORK: THEMES FROM THE HISTORY OF SAFE SPACES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Largely absent from the safe space discourse is a consideration of their genealogy, but as I argue in this section, the history of safe spaces not only allows us to situate them in a broader context than academia but also gives us direction for developing a more robust and nuanced conceptual framework. Understanding why (and who) initiated safe spaces in the past—and what these spaces provided for those who initiated them—provokes questions about how their current iterations might resemble their historical counterparts and where they might diverge.

Kenney (2001) argues that the history of safe spaces is steeped in activism and theory, and begins in spirit—although perhaps not by name—in gay and lesbian

communities in urban America in the mid-1960s. Not only was consensual gay sex illegal in many states (anti-sodomy laws were still in effect), but even something as basic as dancing together or holding hands in public could mean risking criminal punishment (Crockett, 2016). Needless to say, public space was especially dangerous for those who fell outside of heteronormative expectations; not only would sexual "deviants" be vulnerable to homophobic slurs and attitudes, but they would also risk becoming victims of anti-gay violence and criminal punishment. At a time when the sexual oppression of LGBT people was lawfully sanctioned, these gay and lesbian bars acted as places where LGBT people could "find practical resistance to social repression," and more than anything, find community, belonging, and good company (Harris, 2015). While gay bars were not explicitly referred to as "safe spaces" at the time, they provided a reprieve from the homophobic public sphere, emblematic of the "safe spaces" that were to be identified as such in the following years. However, it is important to acknowledge that although these bars were safe insofar as they offered a haven to gay and lesbian communities, they were not free from risk; gay bars were still subject to police raids, and later, AIDS presented a serious threat to the gay community. Nevertheless, Kenney's (2001) argument speaks to Boostrom's (1998) question about why some people might seek a form of safety that is something other than physical; manifestations of discrimination and oppression—not physical violence alone—threaten the wellbeing of marginalized communities.

The term "safe space" first appeared during the twentieth-century Women's Liberation Movement in reference to women's consciousness-raising groups (Kenney, 2001). Poignantly, especially for the purposes of this thesis, it should be noted that these consciousness-raising groups began in New York and are attributed to women's liberation

group, New York Radical Women. The liberation group's ambitions were "radical," writes Sarachild (1978), one of the women who initiated consciousness-raising groups, aimed to start a "*mass movement of women* to put an end to the barriers of segregation and discrimination based on sex" (Sarachild, 1978: 144). Consciousness-raising groups, she says, were a means of catalyzing this movement. They were "a form of structured discussion in which women connected their personal experiences to larger structures of gender" (Baxandall and Gordon, 2000: 13), with the hopes of connecting lived experiences to systems of oppression and "lay[ing] the ground for radical [social] change" (Crook, 2018: 1157). They were predicated on the belief that "the personal is political," a now well-known phrase that has seeped into mainstream consciousness and was first coined by Hanisch, one of the other women who initiated these feminist consciousness-raising groups (see: Hanisch, 1970). Sharing emotions and firsthand experiences were deemed viable approaches to formulating cultural critique in these groups (Crook, 2018: 1158). Finally, the aim was not only to raise peoples' consciousness but also to take public actions, challenge the status quo, and provoke new ideas (Sarachild, 1978: 145).

In these consciousness-raising groups, women debated issues like housework, childcare, sex, jobs, childhood, motherhood, and equal pay (and debated which issues should be up for debate); the aim was to keep the feminist movement away from single issue organizing and instead to forge a new type of theorizing about women and gender altogether (Sarachild, 1978: 145). Rather than places that restricted speech, consciousness-raising groups were described by Sarachild (1978) as arenas that created space for courageous and daring conversations. She writes (in a piece pertinently titled, "Consciousness-raising: a radical weapon"):

> We would be the first to dare to say and do the undareable, what women really felt and wanted. The first job now was to raise awareness and understanding, our own and others—awareness that would prompt people to organize and to act on a mass scale. (Sarachild, 1978: 145)

Much like safe spaces nowadays are ridiculed (or, alternatively, subject to fearmongering), these consciousness raising groups received their fair share of public disdain, too. In some instances, the topics they discussed were "dismissed as 'petty' or 'not political'"; when trying to evaluate why women were not receiving equal pay, their efforts were reduced to "therapy" rather than rigorous "politics, economics, or even study at all" (Sarachild, 1978: 145). In addition to being framed as anti-intellectual or juvenile, they were told, somewhat paradoxically, that their work was dangerous (Sarachild, 1978: 146). The women and their spaces of discussion were called various names ("man-hating," "sour grapes," "coffee klatches," "hen parties," "bitch sessions"), and when they would try to explain their lived experiences of gendered oppression, they were met with even more resistance. Men would say that they were oppressed, too, or they would shift the blame to other women (Sarachild, 1978: 146). Nevertheless, Sarachild writes that six years after initiating these meetings, something remarkable had happened: consciousness-raising groups had not only spread across the United States but had even made it into the mainstream—albeit sometimes in "contradictory contexts" (1978: 1467).

The North American New Left, a broad political movement that began in the 1960s and continues to influence leftist politics and organizing today, took inspiration from these consciousness raising groups (Venegas, 2020: 3). Building from the notion that new people (i.e., people with raised consciousness) create revolutions, not vice versa, the New Left embraced prefigurative politics (Venegas, 2020: 3), a practice that has since become associated with safe spaces (Harris, 2015). The idea of prefigurative politics, or

prefiguration, is attributed to Boggs (1977), who describes it as "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (1977: 100). Prefigurative movements include Zapatismo, 21st Century Socialism, the Movement of the Squares, and Occupy Wall Street (Raekstad, 2017). Prefiguration puts "vision into practice" and is often characterized by anti-hierarchical values (Venegas, 2020: 3). Yates describes it as "the attempted construction of alternative or utopian social relations in the present, either in parallel with, or in the course of, adversarial social movement protest" (Yates, 2015: 1). Some theorists have emphasized that contrary to other forms of political organizing where the ends justify the means, under prefiguration, "ends and means are very much the same" (Calhoun, 1993: 404; see also: Yates, 2015: 3). For this reason, prefiguration is often associated with "micropolitics," a sociological term coined by Burns (1961) to theorize the internal workings of political organizing and smaller-scale politics. Yates (2015) argues that activists who focus on micropolitics place as much emphasis on their internal practices and processes as on their movement's goals (2015: 17). Although some theorists have cast doubt on whether micropolitics can produce macro change, Rowe (2016), who writes about mindfulness as a micropolitical practice, argues that it can contribute to broader social transformation by "helping activists prepare for direct action, improving self-care/resilience, transforming trauma, embodying liberatory values and habits, and improving organizational effectiveness" (2016: 5). Contemporary social movement studies continue to foreground prefiguration and micropolitical frameworks and are viewed as paradigmatic of new social movements, although these orientations are not new (Yates, 2015: 2).

In the 2000s, prefigurative characteristics became associated with the "safe space" metaphor, like the following: horizontal organization, consensus-based decision-making over majoritarian democracy, use of trigger warnings for discussing sensitive topics, "anti-oppression" trainings, asking for people's pronouns (e.g. he/him, she/her, they/them), and gender-neutral toilets (Harris, 2015)—many of the same features that safe spaces have today. As such, "the 'safe space' designation came to signify a set of standard respectful practices" (Harris, 2015). These practices gained worldwide publicity when Occupy Wall Street kicked off in 2011, but they had already been entrenched in left-wing organizing for over a decade (Harris, 2015). Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind a point raised by Sarachild (1978) decades earlier, when she noticed that consciousness-raising groups had developed "a number of formalized 'rules' or 'guidelines' for consciousness-raising": that these methods were intended to generate *knowledge*; standardized practices could "be changed if they [weren't] working" and were never intended as the end goal but as a means of facilitating knowledge production (Sarachild, 1978: 148).

A variety of groups have since embraced the "safe space" metaphor to describe their method(s) of political organizing, and these, in turn, have received scholarly attention, such as: a community center for the LGBT community in Jerusalem (Hartal, 2018), a farming center for unhoused people in Los Angeles (Bullock, Truong and Chhun, 2016), Black American churches that aim to destigmatize AIDS (Beadle-Holder, 2011), a Philadelphia-based feminist Facebook group (Clark-Parsons, 2018), and a women's only bathhouse in Toronto that enables people of marginalized genders to explore their sexualities (Nash and Bain, 2007). These safe spaces resonate with some of the themes emerging from this section: being formed in response to systemic discrimination; acting as community spaces

that facilitate participation, self-identification, and consciousness-raising; embodying values and missions through prefiguration; and ultimately, being oriented towards enacting greater social change. I now turn to various anthropological literatures that speak to these themes and from which I can build a conceptual framework for safe spaces.

(3.2) THE FEMINIST COUNTERPUBLIC

Fraser's (1990) conceptualization of the feminist subaltern counterpublic describes the gay bars and consciousness-raising groups I discussed in the previous section, and by extension, can act as a starting point for reconceptualizing safe spaces, too. Writing from a background in critical and feminist theories, she notes:

> …. members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. (Fraser, 1990: 76)

Fraser's (1990) definition of a counterpublic—which I will soon examine in greater detail—is a response to Habermas' notion of the public sphere (see: Habermas, 1962) which focuses heavily on the bourgeois and upper classes of society while neglecting other groups, like women, people of color, working class people. According to Habermas (1962), the public sphere is marked by its accessibility and is an arena whereby people engage political participation through discourse. However, as Fraser (1990) notes, not only does Habermas "[idealize] the liberal public sphere," but he also "fails to examine other, nonliberal, non-bourgeois public spheres" (1990: 60-61). The public sphere that Habermas (1962) describes

is a "space of zero degree culture," despite the fact that it is built on the exclusions of certain social groups (Fraser: 1990: 64), who lack the same kind of participatory parity that the bourgeois have at their disposal (1990: 63-65). Incidentally, Fraser's (1990) criticisms of Habermas' (1962) depiction of the public sphere echo my own criticisms of the dominant safe space discourse, which often depicts classrooms as neutral arenas in which everyone has equal participatory access to free speech and fair debate.

Rather than understanding the public sphere as a singular public, or a kind of social totality, Fraser argues that there is a multiplicity of publics, which interact and compete with bourgeois publics (1990: 61). Similarly, Michael Warner (2002a, 2002b) argues that rather than looking at the public sphere as a single entity, it should be understood as being comprised of infinite *publics*. A public, on the other hand:

> …is a kind of social totality…. It might be the people organized as the nation, the commonwealth, the city, the state, or some other community. It might be very general, as in Christendom or humanity. But in each case the public, as a people, is thought to include everyone within the field in question. (Warner, 2002b: 49)

A public, then, is a "cultural space" (Phillips and Cole, 2013: 6) with a distinct sense of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion. Consider the following explanations:

> To address or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one's disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology. (Warner, 2002a: 10)

> Publics…are political spaces with unwritten rules about who is included and who is not, and why. Being accepted as a member may be viewed as entailing a kind of 'civilizing process' (Elias 1978), where bodily comportment and speech – what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus* – are subject to micro-surveillance practices that determine who is heard and seen in public and who can make decisions on behalf of others. (Phillips and Cole, 2013: 6)

Based on this reading, a public is a cultural and political assemblage that includes some people and excludes others; rules about inclusion and exclusion are not necessarily enforced with explicit policies, but nevertheless, cultural cues can govern who is seen, heard, who able to participate. As many scholars have argued, dominant (or bourgeois) Euro-American publics tend to be heterosexual (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Valentine, 1996, 1993), white (Brodkin et al., 2011; Hill, 1998; Meek, 2006), masculine (Valentine, 1989), middle class (Amster, 2008; Bergamaschi, Castrignanò and Rubertis, 2014; Listerborn, 2016; Wee, 2016), and able-bodied (Lubitow, Rainer and Bassett, 2017; Yılmaz, 2018). In other words, this "civilizing process" (Elias, 1978) is delineated by structures of power.

Similarly, publics may exclude potential members through various material, cultural, spatial, and even legal means: architecture and the built environment (Schindler, 2015), symbols (Guetzkow and Fast, 2016), bodies and dress (Mann, 2018), visible relationships (Morgan and Davis-Delano, 2016; Valentine, 1996), and language (Perrino, 2018), as a handful of examples. These exclusions can be made deliberately—consider how urban planners might use the built environment to exclude homeless people by spiking benches, the ground, or other areas they might otherwise occupy (Chellew, 2019; Petty, 2016)—or they may be culturally "regulated" by the dominant normative order, like the presence of heterosexual couples holding hands (Morgan and Davis-Delano, 2016). A public is not apolitical; it embodies the "shifting domain of power that reflects and produces inequalities" (Phillips and Cole, 2013: 1).

People experience publics differently depending how they relate to dominant structures of power. Those who are subordinated are more likely to experience violence in dominant publics (Aldama, 2003; Meyer, 2015; Richie, 2012), navigate these publics

fearfully (Day, 1999; Koskela, 1997; Koskela and Pain, 2000; Mehta, 1999; Pain, 1991; Valentine, 1989), or regulate their behavior in some way by practicing what Foucault called "self-governance" (Foucault, 1977). For example, LGBTQ+ people may feel the need to "pass" as straight when navigating heterosexualized public space—by altering their behavior or dress—in order to reduce their exposure to potential homophobic violence (Stanko and Curry, 1997). Fraser (1990) also writes about informal barriers and rules that prevent participatory parity—even when on paper, everyone is allowed to participate (1990: 64). And yet, this discrimination and dominant culture can be invisible to those who benefit from structures of power. As Corteen (2002) writes, it is often the case that only LGBTQ+ people are aware of the ways in which space and place is heterosexualized because the process is so naturalized (2002: 261).

As Travers says, "the so-called public sphere is not public after all" (2003: 229). Because subordinated communities are often excluded, they may find it useful to build publics of their own. This is where Fraser's (1990) definition of the feminist counterpublic comes into view. Below are two more descriptions of counterpublics:

> Over the past three centuries, many such scenes have organized themselves as publics, and because they differ markedly in one way or another from the premises that allow the dominant culture to understand itself as a public, they have come to be called counterpublics. (Warner, 2002a: 112-113)

> Those excluded – the politically, economically and sexually disenfranchised – may form their own counterpublics.... These are alternative publics that work to redraw the boundaries of dominant public spheres, a perspective that highlights the potential dynamic interplay among popular or alternative publics. (Phillips and Cole, 2013: 3).

Relevant for the purposes of this thesis, Fraser (1990) suggests that the women's liberation movement is an example of a feminist subaltern counterpublic. She writes:

> Perhaps the most striking example is the late-twentieth century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic, with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places. (Fraser, 1990: 76)

As Fraser argues, counterpublics can create new forms of language and knowledge, challenge dominant public discourse, and even bring issues into public concern that may have otherwise been deemed "private" or "personal" (1990: 70-74). Fraser's (1990) depiction of the feminist subaltern counterpublic resonates with Sarachild's (1978) portrayal of the consciousness-raising groups she and other women once initiated.

Crucial to Fraser's argument is the idea that counterpublics have the potential to enact greater social change and that their *publicity* is essential for doing so. Rather than being bounded entities where people can withdraw from society writ large, they are places that hold potential to stimulate societal change, or at the very least, enable marginalized people to navigate society with more ease. While Fraser (1990) highlights the importance of counterpublic language in this process, Travers illustrates that feminist counterpublics can enable women to acquire skills and confidence, thereby improving their engagements with dominant publics (2003: 231). Steele (2013) goes one step further and argues that a counterpublic enables its members to develop and express their identities, which can be taken to—but not easily fostered in—dominant publics. Warner adds that counterpublics supply alternative forms of sociability between strangers (Warner, 2002a: 121), which can be taken into other social arenas. Like Johnson (2013) has said of heterotopias, counterpublics "do not sit in isolation as reservoirs of freedom, emancipation or resistance; they coexist, combine and connect" (2013: 800). It is through these collisions and connections that they derive their emancipatory potential.

Some scholars have focused on the roles of discourse and media for addressing and convening (counter)publics. Warner, for example, whose scholarship primarily focuses on literature and print media, writes about "the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" (Warner, 2002a: 66)—a social entity bound by shared readership, discourse, and reflexivity. Mass mediated communication has been the basis for other framings of publics within anthropology, too (Cody, 2011). Hirschkind's (2006) ethnography of cassette tapes in Egypt, arguably the most well-known anthropological example that utilizes Warner's counterpublic framework, demonstrates how the audio-cassette tape provides a user-friendly medium for Muslim listeners to engage with sermons and develop Islamic public virtues (Hirschkind, 2006). More recently, scholars have shown the power of online spaces not only to convene (counter)publics but to interrupt dominant discourse, too. Boutrous (2015) has argued that blogging and other forms of online engagement have created a digital counterpublic, such as the "Afrosphere," which allows Black members of the African diaspora to circulate "issues of shared concern and [engage] with a wider public," as well as think through "Black solidarity and strategies of Black diasporic identification" (Boutros, 2015). Meanwhile, Dey (2020a), writes that the digital feminist counterpublic emerging in India has catalyzed a counternarrative on gender-based violence while giving rise to national and transnational solidarities.

Space is another recurring theme in counterpublic literature as both a metaphor and a materiality, although space as a key concept is often not explicitly unpacked in this context (an argument I expand upon in Chapter 5). For example, Travers, in discussing how online conversations can be exclusionary to women, writes about "the sense of entitlement required to produce public written statements and to take up *social space*" (2003: 224, my emphasis).

She adds that women "take up less *conversational space*" than men (2003: 224, my emphasis). Similarly, Fraser writes that counterpublics "expand discursive *space*" (Fraser, 1990: 67, my emphasis). Meanwhile, others emphasize the site-specific nature of (counter)publics, which are constituted—at least in part—by their materiality (regardless of that materiality is comprised of physical or cyber "material"). For example, Renninger (2015) argues that Tumblr has unique "technological architecture" (such as having "followers" rather than "friends," "likes" or "reblogs" rather than public commenting, and hyperlinked hashtags), which enables counterpublic communication (in his own research, for the asexual community) that other social networking sites cannot provide. Some authors have chosen to embrace the phrase "counterpublic space" to elucidate the site-specific nature of these publics (see: Chew, 2018; Steele, 2013). Others have attempted to unify counterpublic literature with Foucault's heterotopia to emphasize their spatial situatedness—to give counterpublics a sense of *place* (see: Kohn, 2001).

As Steele acknowledges, some counterpublics emerge by happenchance while others are formed intentionally to challenge power structures and provoke personal transformation (2013: 138). Consequently, not all counterpublics are prefigurative, but some are. With a recognition that some counterpublics are intentional and predicated on a politics of hope and futurity (and aim to embody a society that does not yet exist but *could* exist), Steele (2013) creatively merges Muñoz' (2009) notion of utopia with that of the queer counterpublic. According to Muñoz' (2009), the idea of utopia is not prescriptive. He writes that "utopian performativity suggests another modality of doing and being that is in process, unfinished" (Muñoz, 2009: 99), a reading that can be applied to prefigurative counterpublics.

This interpretation of a counterpublic—one that is formed intentionally and where its members may embrace prefigurative politics—also resonates with Cooper's (2013) notion of an "everyday utopia." Cooper (2013) describes everyday utopias in prefigurative language: "they work by creating the change they wish to encounter, building and forging new ways of experiencing social and political life" (2013: 2). Inspired by Levitas (2013), Cooper writes that they are "oriented to the hope, desire, and belief in the possibility of other, better worlds" (2013: 3), resonating with Muñoz' (2009) and Steele's (2013) interpretations of utopia. While everyday utopias may not offer "totalizing expressions of what an ideal self-sufficient life could be" (Cooper, 2013: 9), they nevertheless enact new practices, provide opportunity to "bring about (or seek to bring about) new forms of normalization, desire, and subjectivity" (Cooper, 2013: 5), and "are hugely fruitful places from which to think differently and imaginatively about concepts" (Cooper, 2013: 11).

Although counterpublics are often leveraged to challenge the exclusionary nature of dominant publics, they can nevertheless (re)produce hierarchies and power disparities (see: Dey, 2020a; Phillips and Cole, 2013; Travers, 2003). Phillips and Cole (2013) suggest evaluating how they are also (re)negotiated and (re)invented to "buoy equality projects rather than re-entrenching inequalities" (Phillips and Cole, 2013: 8), and Squires advocates for investigating the "internal politics of that particular public sphere and its material and cultural resources" (Squires, 2002: 448). Not only do counterpublics emerge in response to dominant publics, but they also emerge from their own internal politics (Squires, 2002: 448). As such, they are rich sites for exploring micropolitical action.

(3.3) RETHINKING SAFETY WITH THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF VIOLENCE

Although safety is not a topic that has been a significant focus of anthropological enquiry (barring safety in fieldwork, perhaps), violence—especially structural and symbolic violence—has increasingly received attention from critical anthropologists hoping to shine a light on social inequalities. An anthropology of violence, I argue, can illuminate the significance and meaning(s) of safety in the contexts of safe spaces by providing a framework for rendering visible the kinds of everyday violence that prompt marginalized communities to create safe spaces in the first place. Moreover, it can help us reframe some of the exclusions, access barriers, and lack of participatory parity marginalized people face (as described in the counterpublic literature) as a form—or manifestation of—violence.

While not the only anthropologist to invoke the concept of structural violence in his work, Farmer (2004) was one of the first people to propose an anthropology of structural violence, which has been described as "a theoretical frame, a method of inquiry, and a moral/ethical imperative for the anthropological enterprise" (Green, 2004: 319). In his exegesis, Farmer describes structural violence as "violence exerted systematically—that is, indirectly—by everyone who belongs to a certain social order" (2004: 307) and can manifest as "death, injury, illness, subjugation, stigmatization, and even psychological terror" (2004: 308). Farmer uses this concept to unveil the causes of epidemic disease and suffering in Haiti, which he argues is the embodiment of structural violence like racism, slavery, and colonialism, rather than a manifestation of a biological or epidemiological processes alone (Farmer, 2004). Interestingly, although Farmer's framework was proposed only relatively

recently in anthropology, the term "structural violence" dates back at least to Galtung (1969).[2]

A concept closely related to structural violence is symbolic violence, a term that has also recently featured in anthropological discourse and arguably can be used interchangeably with structural violence. "Symbolic violence" is a phrase generally attributed to Bourdieu and describes the ways in which the status quo can reinforce power differences between different social groups; this violence is not the result of deliberate action but through the subconscious reification of norms. Bourdieu writes that symbolic violence is "exerted for the most part…through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition…recognition or even feeling" (Bourdieu, 2001: 2) and that it is "immanent in everyone's habitus" (2001: 33). Even something as quotidian as language "can constitute violence and be constituted by it" (Thapar-Björkert et al., 2016: 148; see also: Žižek, 2008). Although symbolic and structural violence may be the most common concepts invoked to explore violence beyond its most narrow definition, it is worth acknowledging that they closely resemblance other concepts: "everyday violence" and "invisible genocides" (Scheper-Hughes, 1996), "banality of evil" (Arendt, 1994), and "culture of terror" (Taussig, 1984), are but a few examples. Heteronormativity, white supremacy, transphobia, classism, gender inequality, and ableism, for instance, also fall under this umbrella category of structural/symbolic violence; they name specific forms of structural violence based on sexuality, race, class, gender, and ability.

[2] Galtung, writing from the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo, first invoked the concept of structural violence as a foil for "peace," which he defines as the "absence of violence" (168). Much like I argue is the case for interrogating the notion of safety, if peace is "to be regarded highly because it is action against violence, then the concept of violence must be broad enough to include the most significant varieties, yet specific enough to serve as a basis for concrete action" (168).

There are a few qualities that distinguish structural and symbolic violence from more colloquial invocations of the word "violence," which often depict physical acts of aggression, can be ascribed to an individual or group of individuals, and imply intent to injure. Many of these characteristics were pointed out by Galtung (1969) decades ago but have since been illustrated and expanded upon ethnographically. One of the most important points is that structural violence includes not only physical harms but also as psychological ones; it "works on the soul" and might "decrease mental potentialities" (Galtung, 1969: 169). In other words, "'violence' is a slippery concept that goes beyond physicality to include assaults on self-respect and personhood," and for this reason, violence is best conceptualized "as operating along a continuum from direct physical assault to symbolic violence and routinized everyday violence" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004: 318).

A concept that captures these psychological and emotional aspects is "ontological security," a term coined by the sociologist Anthony Giddens, which refers to "the confidence that most human beings have in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action," and relates to a "sense of reliability of persons and things" (Giddens, 1990: 92). Although the term has been employed in International Relations to explain state decision-making in periods of uncertainty, it has more recently been invoked by social scientists seeking to explain the impacts structural violence has on the everyday lives and emotional wellbeing of subordinated groups. Unhoused people, for example—who often are discriminated against in multiple ways, like being LGBTQ+ and/or having mental illness—are more likely to suffer ontological *in*security (Matthews, Poyner and Kjellgren, 2019; Padgett, 2007; Patterson et al., 2013). Vaquera et al. (2017) have also shown that undocumented youth in the United States struggle to sustain a feeling of ontological security

by virtue of being "othered" by the legal system and outside of the state's provision of safety (2017: 305). This insecurity can develop into mental illness but can also prevent them from achieving social mobility (Vaquera et al., 2017: 312).

While structural and symbolic violence do not necessarily entail physical violence,[3] several anthropologists have shown that they can be embodied and manifest as sickness. In addition to Farmer's work on disease and suffering in Haiti (2004), Holmes' (2013) ethnography captures the harsh social realities of Triqui migrants employed as farmworkers in the United States. These migrants often suffer disproportionate levels of physical suffering and injury, which Holmes argues is the embodiment of segregated labor, racist insults, and military repression; migrants' physical conditions correspond to their positions within hierarchies and the discrimination they face rather than any inherent medical conditions (Holmes, 2013: 90). A similar argument has been made by McGuire and Sheridan (2019), whose ethnographic work shows how "risk becomes embodied in the lives—and deaths—of undocumented Mexican and Central American migrants" (McGuire and Sheridan, 2019: 3-4).

Another key feature of structural violence is that it does not implicate any personal actor, and it cannot easily be attributed to any one person, since it often is embedded in institutions, political economy, and history. Instead, "violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances" (Galtung, 1969: 171). However, to complicate matters, "[s]tructural violence is generally invisible because it is part of the routine grounds of everyday life and transformed into expressions of moral

[3] Nevertheless, structural violence is always backed by plausible threat of physical violence. Manalansan (2005: 152), for example, argues that physical violence is a manifestation of structural violence but that they are not two distinct categories.

worth," which can make it easy to "misrecognize the extent to which structural inequalities and power relations are naturalized by our categories and conception of what violence really is" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004b: 2). This point echoes Bourdieu's concept of "misrecognition," which asserts that power relations are masked because they are seen "not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, xiii). This process of misrecognition makes it challenging for people to see how they are complicit in (re)producing structures of domination. Misrecognition may also explain why in a classroom, for example, power dynamics may be masked to more privileged members of that space and therefore seem like a sphere where speech is freer than it is.

Not being able to pinpoint a violent agent can be disquieting in a system that posits violence as individual moral failure (Farmer, 2004: 307). In the context of neoliberal governance, as is prominent in much of contemporary Western capitalism, both responsibility and moral blame are assigned to individuals, rather than to structures, institutions, and systems (Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017). Moreover, in neoliberal societies, people are more likely to blame themselves for situations that might be better explained by structural violence (see: Pultz et al., 2020: 149). Even within university curricula, violence usually appears as psychological or sociological "deviance," or it appears in more obvious subjects like war, peace, and conflict studies (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004b: 2). An anthropology of structural violence, however, is "passionately against victim-blaming theories of human suffering" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004a: 317) and draws strength by illustrating that most acts of violence are not outlier acts of aggression but inscribed in social norms (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004b: 5).

Authors writing from a feminist perspective have made significant contributions to understandings of structural and symbolic violence. For instance, feminist geographers have highlighted the ways in which public and private space are inscribed with structural violence and serve as places where dominant structures, inequalities, and discrimination are (re)produced. Research has shown that because heterosexuality is the dominant sexuality in Western culture, space itself becomes "heterosexed." Heteronormativity—a term that describes the violent nature of heterosexuality for those who fall outside dominant sexual norms—is reproduced in everyday place likes the workplace, hotels, and other urban spaces, which can make lesbians, for example, feel out of place and socially, morally, and spatially excluded (Valentine, 1996, 1993). Additionally, feminist scholars have demonstrated that heteronormative violence is (re)produced through everyday norms and actions and habitus; "dispositions (habitus) are inseparable from the relations and structures of power that produce them," which can make them appear "natural" (Thapar-Björkert et al., 2016: 145; see also: Sinclair, 2017). Since the critical theorist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw first published her work on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), feminist scholars—especially Black and other feminists of color—have highlighted how race and gender intersect, and how Black women are often absent from analyses of gendered violence. Perhaps most importantly, feminists have highlighted the importance of *naming* structural violence. Naming violence makes it "speakable" and thereby something that can be acknowledged and contested (Thapar-Björkert, Samelius and Sanghera, 2016); it also helps provide direction for feminist politics and action (Frazer and Hutchings, 2019a). This idea echoes what Fraser (1990) and Sarachild (1978) say about feminist counterpublics and consciousness-raising groups, respectively.

While there is a compelling case for developing an anthropology of violence, the methods for doing so are less obvious. As a starting point, Farmer (2004) emphasizes that an anthropology of structural violence should draw upon history, biology, and political economy, and moreover, that it must be "historically deep and geographically" broad (2004: 309). Although anthropologists tend to begin their research by observing "current events and the ethnographically visible," this process risks seeing "the puddles…but not the rainstorms and certainly not the gathering thunderstorms" (2004: 309). As such, an anthropology of violence requires enquiry across time and space and an exploration of how situations in the present came to be, not only an observation of how things look now. However, it has been cautioned that Farmer's (2004) approach might risk enforcing a binary between oppression and resistance that becomes messier in the lived experiences of the disenfranchised (Green, 2004: 320). Therefore, not only must the anthropologist historicize and contextualize these large-scale structures, institutions, and the processes by which violence manifests, she must also "explore spaces of violence locally" and the ways "violence is reworked through the routines of daily life" (Green, 2004: 320). The integration of a more localized approach facilitates nuanced analysis of how power relations unfold on the ground (Green, 2004: 320), including how victims of violence can perpetrate it, too, a subtlety that critical anthropologists ought to engage with (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004a: 318). As such, a material-historical approach, as well one that explores how violence operates on a micro-scale, are both important aspects of an anthropological approach to structural violence.

Although social scientists tend to rely on sociological and historical approaches to structural violence, geographers and urban anthropologists have argued that a spatial approach to injustice might be an even more productive method for rendering visible the

structures of discrimination that might be otherwise elusive. I argue that these approaches can be incorporated into an anthropology of violence, too. Soja (2010), who describes himself as an "urbanist," writes that "everything that is social (justice included) is simultaneously inherently spatial, just as everything spatial…is simultaneously and inherently socialized" (Soja, 2010: 5-6). As such, a critical spatial perspective can facilitate analysis of unjust geographies (Soja, 2010: 5). Moreover, space—which crosses many scales, from the global to the local, from the planet to architecture to the body—is a vast and rich terrain for researching social processes, including structurally violent ones.

Within anthropology, Low (2017) has advocated for an anthropology of space for similar reasons. "Spatializing culture," the name she gives to her framework, is "critical to understanding the everyday lives of people whose homes and homelands are disrupted by globalization, uneven development, violence and social inequality" (2017: 1) and "uncovering social injustice and forms of exclusion" (2017: 7). Low (2017) favors focusing on material aspects of urban formation like history and political economy, which she considers "social production" (not dissimilar to Farmer, 2004), as well as "the transformation of space through language, social interaction, memory, representation, behavior and use into scenes and actions that convey meaning," or "social construction" (Low, 2017: 7). Although a spatial approach has not featured in key anthropology of violence texts—or at least has not been described in such terms—given its ability to render (in)justice more visible (and contestations to it), we ought to add it to our methodological toolbox for an anthropology of violence. Moreover, it is worth highlight that Galtung uses "social injustice" interchangeably with "structural violence" (1969: 171). Given that spatial

approaches can help uncover (in)justice, spatializing structural violence seems like a natural theoretical move.

The anthropology of structural violence is still an emerging field, but it derives power in its ability to "inform the study of the social machinery of oppression" (Farmer, 2004: 307). It has been lauded for its ability to render "visible these erased and unexpected linkages between violence, suffering, and power" and centering issues of social injustice and inequality within anthropology (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004a: 318). Moreover, an anthropology of structural violence has been dubbed a "therapeutic anthropology" (Heggenhougen, 2004: 320) for its potential to not only identify the conditions of suffering but the means by which they might be corrected. It is my hope that this framework will also elucidate the meaning(s) of safety as understood by my research participants and clarify the purpose of safe spaces, and that I can build upon this promising field of research by highlighting lively resistance to violence, too.

(3.4) THE CURRENT CONTEXT: NEOLIBERAL VIOLENCE, THE RISK SOCIETY, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

While the modern-day context of violence is often absent from safe space discourse, unpacking categorizations of risk (and safety) under late capitalism provides a starting point for contextualizing the emergence of safe spaces. As asserted by the Cultural Theory framework (see: Douglas, 1978, 1970; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982), risk is a socially constructed category, and social structures reinforce perceptions of risk and allocation of blame. In other words, the identification of risks, as well as the decisions made to contain those risks, are socially driven and therefore prone to being politicized (Tansey and

O'Riordan, 1999: 72). As Hudson (2003) writes, "Risk classification and risk control are, therefore, first and last strategies of inclusion and exclusion," and ordering people in this way and "leaves some individuals and groups outside of rights, outside of the moral-legal community" (2003: 76). It follows that the ways in which risk is culturally categorized has implications for who belongs to a public and who is excluded from it.

This politicization of risk is amplified in a place like the United States, which scholars often refer to as a "risk society." Beck (1992) first introduced the idea of a risk society some three decades ago and has more recently clarified the notion. He writes, "Modern society has become a risk society in the sense that it is increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced" (Beck, 2006: 332). Although managing risk is not a new concept, as Western societies have shifted into late modernism, we have witnessed a new "preoccupation with risk" alongside "the mutation of political liberalism into contemporary neo-liberalism" (Hudson, 2003: 42). Neoliberalism is characterized by "[de]regulation, privatization, and withdrawal from the state" (Harvey, 2005: 3) and is premised on the idea that wellbeing is found in individual entrepreneurial pursuits (Harvey, 2005: 2). This transition into neoliberalism has been especially prominent since the 1970s and remains a prevailing American political philosophy today.

Despite neoliberalism's association with "freedoms"—like "strong free property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005: 2), as many theorists and researchers have argued, neoliberalism leads to inequality and greater social and spatial stratification (see: Harvey, 2005; Hudson, 2003; Manalansan, 2005) and can even be classified as neoliberal *violence* (Chan, 2018; Collins and Rothe, 2019; Kamali, 2021). For example, while security was previously considered primarily as a public good, it has become

increasingly closer to a private good; safety, in turn, has become commodified (Hudson, 2003: 70). People who are deemed likely to drain welfare systems are considered risk *posers*, whereas those who stand to "lose" something by these systems are considered risk *bearers*. Welfare systems have moved from more collective forms of insurance like "national health insurance [and] private health insurance" to "private insurance schemes" (Hudson, 2003: 54). It is not so much the provision of risk insurance that is new in neoliberal society, but rather the move from social to private means of acquiring that insurance, a declining sense of solidarity, and an increased emphasis on minimal state power (Hudson, 2003: 54-56).

Moreover, this shift is important when we consider how blame is allocated and consequently who gets to partake in the moral-legal community. In a society increasingly inclined towards hyper-individualism and personal responsibility, the onus is placed on individuals to procure their own safety as well as safeguard others'. For example, intravenous drug users have a greater need to access healthcare due to increased vulnerability to infections like HIV and Hepatitis C, overdose, and mental illness (Muncan et al., 2020); yet, because of their "riskiness" and stigmatization, they often face more barriers to accessing healthcare (Ahern, Stuber and Galea, 2007). Barriers to accessing care systems include finances, lack of social support, and logistical challenges (Matsuzaki et al., 2018) and can made be made worse depending on the drug user's sexuality (Semple et al., 2012) and/or race (Paul et al., 2014). However, lacking access to healthcare means they are more vulnerable to increased and worsening mental and physical health—only reaffirming the risk society's categorization of them as "risky" and excluding them from the provisions they need most. Like Hudson (2003) says about people of lower socioeconomic standing,

drug users are excluded from the care systems they need most, meaning that they "come into contact with risk systems at points where they are already identified as risk posers, as drawers upon systems rather than contributors to them" (Hudson, 2003: 59). People who are marginalized due to factors like class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and citizenship, for example, often lack the socioeconomic means to procure their own safety and are "blamed both for the risks they face and the risks that they pose" (Hudson, 2003: 58).

To have rights under neoliberalism is to perform citizenship in the "proper" way. This good citizenship is something "conferred by property ownership and the security that is enabled by wealth accumulation" (Adeyemi, 2019: 548). It follows, then, that ideal neoliberal citizen is also good consumer (Fontenelle and Pozzebon, 2018; Gent, 2018; Olsen, 2019); those without the means (or desire) to spend not only suffer social exclusions but may even face criminalization, which is often racialized (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2012; Ugarte, 2019; Urbina and Álvarez, 2016). A good neoliberal subject also performs and embodies "civility," and those who do not may be deemed uncivil, unruly, or be branded racist and/or sexist tropes (such as the "angry Black woman," for example) (Bates, 2019; Griffin, 2012; Zerilli, 2014). These types of accusations may serve to silence "bad" neoliberal subjects (see: (Chan, 2018) or "dismiss their equality projects as 'uncivil' or unnecessary—as further ways to manage difference, making it difficult to build alternative futures" (Phillips and Cole, 2013: 11). As Phillips and Cole write:

> Under current conditions of inequality the public: private distinction is no longer only about distinguishing between domestic concerns and the formal public sphere. It is also mobilized to make further distinctions between civil and uncivil behavior, between what is considered to be 'respectable' and what is treated as 'matter out of place', and between good citizens and unruly citizens. (Phillips and Cole, 2013)

Neoliberal categorizations of risk manifest spatially. Writing about a gated community in Los Angeles, Davis (2006) says that these residential enclaves do not represent a demarcation between "safe" and "unsafe" communities so much as a "decisive borderline between the merely well-off and the truly rich—'security' has less to do with personal safety than with the degree of personal insulation, in residential, work, consumption and travel environments, from 'unsavory' groups and individuals, even crowds in general" (Davis, 2006: 224). Davis has even described these communities as (re)producing a kind of "spatial apartheid" (Davis, 2006: 230). Similarly, Low shows how gated communities reflect geographies of fear (of crime) and how residents display a "fortress mentality" (2003: 9). Despite citing their need for "a safe and secure home" (Low, 2003: 11), these gated communities are already in suburban areas where crime rates are low and are not safer than non-gated communities (Low, 2003: 10). Moreover, Low (2003) echoes Hudson's (2003) argument that safety has shifted from a public to private (or club) good.

Much has been written about how public space is becoming increasingly privatized and surveilled (see: Byers, 1998; Kohn, 2004; Loughran, 2017). Surveillance measures have also becoming increasingly creative and may not appear as mechanisms of spatial regulation, such as the use of classical music to deter rowdy youth (Thompson, 2017). Meanwhile, "defensive" or "hostile" architectural features are now commonplace in cities to prevent homeless people from lying down, as seen in divided benches or spiked surfaces (Hu, 2019; Petty, 2016; Smith and Walters, 2018). Gentrification continues to forcibly remove residents from neighborhoods and cities they have inhabited for generations. "Renewal" often acts as code for urban developers and white buyers to target and privatize

poor neighborhoods of color (see: Low, 2017: 82). While gentrification is often wrapped up in language like improving quality of life or cleaning up "sketchy" neighborhoods, gentrification "is a material and symbolic process of 'reclaiming' the city as a space of corporate culture and whiteness, materially and discursively, while criminalizing low-income people of color and their neighborhoods as 'bad' and needing to be 'cleaned out'" (Lipman, 2017).

Despite these challenges, as Phillips and Cole (2013) argue, feminist counterpublics have the potential to "[contest] cultural ideas" and "[transform] ideas of civility, respectability and appropriate conduct" that are pervasive under neoliberalism (2013: 16). Given that risk and safety are socially constructed categories, and therefore give and are given meaning(s) by *people*, the potential to undo them and their potential harms lies with people, too. Safe spaces, which emerge in this context of neoliberal violence and growing inequality, share this capacity with other feminist counterpublics. Moreover, as places that aim to prefigure safer societies, they also hold the potential to demonstrate alternatives to the social and spatial manifestations of "safety" and "security" under neoliberalism. Nevertheless, as places that are very much embedded within neoliberal structures and geographies, they must grapple with its demands and limitations, too.

(4) Towards an anthropology of safety: an ethnography of a safer space in New York City

(4.1) My research questions and field site

My primary research aim is to close the theoretical and empirical gaps in the safe space literature while also forging a critical analysis of safety (and by extension, of

violence). Rather than simply focusing on whether safe spaces restrict free speech and protect the fragile egos of young, liberal snowflakes, I aim both to simplify and broaden the discussion about safe spaces. My main research question is both modest and bold: What is a safe space? I approach this conceptual question ethnographically, with attention paid to the ways in which the Pocketbooks community (re)envisions, (re)defines, and invokes both notions and conventions of safety to build an example of a more liberated, freer society. My aim is to transform "safe space" from an "overused but undertheorized metaphor" (Barrett, 2010: 1) to a robust one that incorporates their social, spatial, and historic context, the process by which they are (continuously) made, and the perspectives of those who initiate and participate in them.

There are several reasons why Pocketbooks, a feminist bookstore on the Lower East Side of Manhattan is a fertile research site for exploring these questions—and possibly the most ethnographically rich site anywhere to do so. Not only does it bear significant resemblance to other safe spaces, but the community is often regarded as the original safe space of its kind and the "expert" on such spaces. As one Collective member told me, Pocketbooks' safer space policy often acts as a blueprint for other safe space policies; I found out firsthand while trying to find examples of safe spaces policies to quote in this chapter that it was a challenge to find policies that did not copy Pocketbooks' policy verbatim. My research, then, takes us to an "original" safe space source, inasmuch as an origin can be claimed. This assertation is corroborated by Collective members at Pocketbooks who are most familiar with its history, as well as by media outlets.

Few safe spaces have such a long, observable history, but Pocketbooks has been open since 1999, making this space a unique site for exploring the social, historical, spatial,

and political context of the emergence of safe spaces. First, it was once a "women's bookstore," which connects it explicitly to the counterpublic literature (see Fraser, 1990), but it is also located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan—the very neighborhood where New York Radical Women was born, the feminist group that first organized consciousness-raising groups and coined the phrase "the personal is political" (see: Hanisch, 1970; Press, 2017). Second, the Lower East Side (and New York more generally) has been the target of a city-wide "quality of life" campaign first introduced by Mayor Giuliani in 1994. However, alongside this campaign—which was intended to reduce crime and provide security—places like Pocketbooks have adopted explicit safe space policies in resistance to Giuliani's changing city. By exploring how perceptions and categorizations of "risk" and "safety" have changed over time and space for different communities in the city, I can further conceptualize the safe space metaphor, including the context gives rise to the emergence of a safe space and what might "safety" mean to those communities.

In contrast with safe spaces that are temporary (such as a safe conference, or safe conversation) or virtual (an online discussion group, for instance), Pocketbooks has a physical site and a community dedicated to making the store a safer space. Its opening hours are long (11am – 11pm daily), but even outside of the shop's opening times, community members are often gathered for social events or are exchanging messages online. Community members regularly discuss how to make the shop safer, hold meetings about people's needs and how they can make improvements to the shop, experiment with new practices and norms, and debate and contest what it means to be a safer space. Because being a safer space is the shop's priority, Pocketbooks is constantly in flux (and often in conflict), but always committed to safety and creating an inclusive space, making it a

dynamic field site to explore the *process* of cultivating a safer space. Pocketbooks' physical site enables us to think about the spatial nature of (counter)publics and the relationship between materiality and safety, too.

Perhaps one of the most unique and contradictory aspects of Pocketbooks is that, while it aims to be a safe space, it is also a business. Pocketbooks must wrestle with capitalist demands—paying rent, dealing with gentrification and raising rent prices, book-buying and running in-store tasks, and having enough labor to run the space—while also trying to mitigate capitalism's harms, such as the exploitation of labor, hierarchy and power, classism, sexism, and so on. At Pocketbooks, the question is not simply, "How do people cultivate a safe space?" but how to do so while also juggling the demands of sustaining a business. This paradox hints at the challenge of creating a safe space in an unsafe world and challenging injustice in an unjust society.

Finally, unlike some safe spaces, which are reserved for one specific community (like women-only spaces), Pocketbooks is significantly more open. For one, as I expand upon in Chapter 4, Pocketbooks aims to provide a safer space for people of all marginalized backgrounds (rather than people of an oppressed gender alone, for example). As such, Pocketbooks makes for a unique site to explore how solidarity can be forged among differences, a question that has occupied feminist theorizing for decades. Additionally, as a bookstore, it is open in an even more literal sense. Any passerby is free to enter the shop as they so desire. So, how can Pocketbooks act as a safer space when its community is not only heterogenous but also unbounded and porous?

(4.2) SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

Categories like risk, violence, and safety are so engrained in everyday life that we often fail to interrogate them and see them as socially (and politically) constructed, even as they continue to be politicized. As a result, inequality not only exists but persists without as much contestation as it deserves; sometimes it is invisible (willfully or otherwise) to much of the (privileged) public. Conceptualizing safe spaces, however, *requires* a critical analysis of risk and safety in society—including how their invocations shape our spatial, social, and personal lives. My research enables us to uncover forms of violence that may be masked as neutral (or even morally good), and it continues to build upon the ideas of Marcus & Fischer (1986) as anthropology as a form of cultural critique.

While "dark anthropology"—such as an anthropology of violence or risk—is essential for evaluating "the harsh dimensions of social life (power, domination, inequality and oppression)" (Ortner, 2019: 47), alongside the emergence of neoliberalism, there is also need for a reaction to this dark turn. "Anthropologies of the good" (Robbins, 2013) or an anthropology "at least partly oriented toward envisioning more positive alternatives" (Ortner, 2016: 66) should be encouraged, too. I take Ortner's stance that anthropology not only can offer cultural critique, it ought to help us think "about alternative political and economic futures (both 'rethinking capitalism' and social movements)" (Ortner, 2016: 66). Rigorous research on safe space allows for an opportunity to critique the normative order while also presenting alternatives to social life as we know it. My research thus resonates with the anthropologies of hope (Jansen, 2021) and the future (Bryant and Knight, 2019).

Finally, although I have reiterated that the prevailing safe space discourse overemphasizes their place in universities, there is no denying that safe spaces have attracted

attention from prominent educators and stakeholders with the power to shape the future of education. Writing about higher education (HE) in India, Dey (2020b: 72) argues that "[w]e must also understand HE as a neoliberal space that fosters violence," which holds in the contexts about which I write, as well. I encourage readers to think of the university as a type of public with (often invisible) impediments to access and participation. What forms of violence pervade Euro-American university culture that we may not name as such? What other ways we might alleviate this harm and foster a more equal environment? Although these are not questions that I will address head-on, it is my hope that developing a more nuanced conceptualization of safe spaces will provide a framework with which to analyze them in other settings, including (but not limited to) universities.

(4.3) TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF SAFETY

Although the concept of risk has acquired critical attention since Beck first published *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Beck, 1992) and has been on anthropology's radar since Douglas presented her cultural theory of risk (Douglas, 1982), safety as a subject in its own right has been largely overlooked. Although safety features regularly in anthropological discussions of safe fieldwork, it occupies almost no theoretical space in the discipline as a category worthy of ethnographic and theoretical inquiry. And yet, safety is a concept—at least in Western cultures—that we are inundated with daily. From national security, to health and food safety, to gun safety, to car safety, and to occupational safety, "safety" is a notion that preoccupies our collective conscience, regularly surfacing both in both large-scale institutions and in our personal lives. Appeals to safety, and likewise, "security," are

invoked in normative decision making about border control, healthcare systems, policing, and workplace policies. The ubiquitous phrase, "safety first"—which features in slogans for food prep safety and workplace compliance, and even in brand names, like "Safety 1st," a children's car seat company—reinforces the idea that safety is one of the ultimate values upon which our lives are organized. Safety sneaks into our subconscious in other ways, too. Hazard control, risk prevention, and even self-defense workshops suggest that safety matters, even if the linguistic emphasis is placed on containing risk rather than procuring safety. Philosophers like Locke (Locke, 1690) and Mill (1861, 1859) once argued that security is the fundamental tenet upon which liberty is founded, and therefore is the ultimate value in liberal societies. Without safety, they suggest, people are not free. For these reasons and more, safety has captured the attention of other disciplines adjacent to anthropology. Security Studies, for example, is a branch of International Relations that has become so immense it is now considered a discipline in its own right.

In a recent Critical Security Studies article, Montesinos Coleman and Rosenow (2016) explore the limits of Critical Security Studies and call for more ethnographic studies of "actually lived lives and struggles," which can "persistently grapple with assemblages of power that transcend given domains of analysis and which cannot be captured within one frame" (2016: 14). In other words, anthropology is *needed* to muddy the waters, disrupt neat frameworks and concepts, and engage in knowledge production that can only be done with in-depth empirical studies. Not only can anthropologists contribute to other disciplines (like Security Studies), but we are also in the unique position to evaluate and rethink seemingly "mundane" and quotidian categories, like safety. As the familiar saying goes, "One of the major goals of anthropology is to make the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic"

(McGuire and Sheridan, 2019: 6). It is an oversight that the discipline has not done more to engage with safety explicitly already.

In conceptualizing a safe space, my thesis works towards building an anthropology of safety. While such an endeavor is a grand undertaking, in my thesis, I make a modest step towards an anthropology of safety by touching upon what I consider its three main features: First, an anthropology of safety considers the conditions for desiring, seeking, and cultivating safety; explores for whom, from what, and to what purpose safety is sought; and evaluates how perceptions and experiences of safety vary along lines of class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and other social, political, and economic factors. Second, this anthropology evaluates the provision of safety. This includes specific safety measures; the process by which those measures are imagined, implemented, and experienced; and again, focuses on how perceptions and experiences of both safety measures and the process of procuring those measures vary along different social, political, and economic lines. Lastly, I borrow from Jansen's (2019) outline for a new "anthropology of hope." Inspired by Jansen's (2019) suggestion for anthropological engagement, I argue that we must explore the relationship between safety as "a subject matter of ethnographic study and anthropology as a form of knowledge production" (Jansen, 2019). An anthropology of safety considers: How can scholarly understandings of safety produce new ways of knowing within anthropology, and how can it aid in "its engagement with political critique and its capacity to imagine alternatives?" In other words, how can an anthropology of safety produce knowledge that helps to envisage a more just world? Studying safe spaces, then, becomes part of this greater project—one that not only interrogates the world in which we live, but helps envision better futures, too.

(5) CHAPTER OUTLINES

This thesis takes shape as follows: In chapter 2, I share my methodology and explore my positionality as a feminist researcher, including tensions in the process of attempting to produce egalitarian, non-exploitative, and socially engaged research. Chapters 3 and 4 contextualize Pocketbooks as a safer space. Drawing from literatures on gentrification and (neoliberal) violence, combined with historical and (some) firsthand participant accounts, Chapter 3 takes New York City as its scope and considers contested meaning(s) and narratives of (un)safety in the city. Primarily, I consider what sociospatial changes have occurred in the last few decades, and how they have impacted—and been impacted by—peoples' often-conflicting perceptions of violence (and safety). Chapter 4 is part historical, part ethnographic, and situates the bookshop within counterpublic literature and feminist movements. I explore the community's Mission Statement(s), how its values and feminism(s) have evolved since the shop first opened in 1999, and the ways in which participants understand Pocketbooks as a safer space. Chapter 4 also paints a picture of participants' "safe" imaginaries—the values and visions through which they attempt to actualize the community's mission for a freer and more just society.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explore the process(es) of translating these "safe" imaginaries into practice and amplify the voices of those who participate in this project. Chapter 5 explores the spatiality (and materiality) of Pocketbooks as safer space and follows participants as they (re)negotiate the ways in which the shop should be partitioned, occupied, and built—and the implications of this spatial ordering for fostering inclusivity and accessibility. It also explores how the materiality of a (counter)public can give rise to its membership (either through practical means or metaphorical symbolism), rather than by

various media forms, which tends to be the focus of counterpublic literature. Next, Chapter 6 considers the "safer" social, behavioral, and linguistic practices adopted by the Pocketbooks community, the impacts of implementing and learning these new cultural forms on the people who practice them, and the new discourse on safety and violence that they give rise to. Last, in Chapter 7, I focus on the ways in which community members debate the community's organizational structure and the limitations of—or expectations for—prefiguring safety in an unequal society. I also explore how these debates can generate conflict (and its implications in place where people seek reprieve), while also forging new paths and possibilities.

Sandwiched between chapters are interludes that speak both indirectly and directly to themes that emerge throughout the thesis. These interludes include vignettes, photographs I took during my fieldwork, and handpicked quotes from some of Pocketbooks' bestselling books and most cherished authors. While I sometimes refer to these interludes within my chapters, my primary aim is to foster a sense of space, place, and people—to envelop the reader in Pocketbooks' atmosphere, and to punctuate an otherwise detailed text with quieter spaces for reflection.

INTERLUDE 1



Figure 3: On the left is a street view of Pocketbooks; on the right is a photograph from inside the shop looking towards the front door; center is a graphic from the Pocketbooks website, which reads, "100% volunteer powered, 98% radical, 2% glitter."

I'm sitting at a table in a bookstore I found through a Google search, "feminist bookstore near me." Although most people seem to be conversing with their friends over coffee, I'm sitting a bit awkwardly by myself with a massive graphic memoir I've brought along, *Blankets* by Craig Thompson. Only a few pages in, the person sitting diagonally from me says, "Hey, is that *Blankets* you're reading? Sick book!" We get to chatting and I learn that his name is Dana, and that both he and his friend, Sammi, are also into graphic

memoirs. Sammi and I bond over *Fun home* by Allison Bechdel, but she warns me against reading Bechdel's book, *Dykes to watch out for*, because it can feel a bit trans exclusionary. When they leave half an hour or so later, they wave goodbye, and I check my calendar to determine when I can next return to the shop.

A handful of weeks later, I'm volunteering at this bookstore and have asked my supervisor's permission to change my field research, too. In what seems like a serendipitous encounter, one of the volunteers on my shift is no other than Dana, who is eager to introduce me to other workers so that I feel welcome in the store. Dana grew up in California and has been vegan his entire life; in his spare time, he goes to punk rock shows, and when he has his way on shift, he plays punk and metal playlists in the shop. He tells me that although is family was always "liberal," he was "radicalized" in high school where he was subject to anti-Mexican racism and was looking for political theories to frame his experiences as a Brown person in the United States. In my first week on shift, he invites me for drinks with Sammi, and they do their best to fill me in on the "who's who" in the shop. Although I can hardly keep track of everyone's names, I'm not too bothered; I've made my first friends at Pocketbooks.

It is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism.

— Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom is a constant struggle*

CHAPTER 2 | METHODOLOGY

In recent years, convincing arguments have been made in favor of an anthropology that is more explicitly politically engaged—one that intentionally names, confronts, and/or disrupts systems of oppression, focuses on more egalitarian research methods, and considers how research findings might be employed to challenge social inequalities. Anthropologies of this variegated tradition have been referred to by many names: "activist anthropology" (Hale, 2001), "public anthropology" (Scheper-Hughes, 2009), "anarchist anthropology" (Graeber, 2004), "engaged anthropology," (Low, 2011; Low and Merry, 2010), "feminist anthropology" (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Lamphere, 2016; Lewin and Silverstein, 2016), "black feminist anthropology" (McClaurin, 2001), "decolonizing anthropology" or "anthropology of liberation" (Harrison, 2010), "critical anthropology" (Ulin, 1991), and "anthropology that takes sides" (Kunnath, 2013). While a feminist anthropologist might favor a more gendered lens, and an anarchist anthropologist might focus more on class and state structures (perspectives, it should be noted, that are not mutually exclusive), these approaches nevertheless share a commitment to dismantling inequalities in both the world we live in and that which exists more immediately in our research.

My thesis is premised "on the assumption that engagement in real-world problems should be at the center of anthropological practice" (Low, 2011: 390). Although at the beginning of my fieldwork I was unfamiliar with Low's (2011) framework, as I unpack in this chapter, doing research at Pocketbooks was the result of my desire to engage with so-called "real-world problems." The first section of this chapter explores what it means for anthropology to be engaged and unpacks some of the complexities in producing more

socially conscious research. Then, with an emphasis on positionality, I detail my fieldwork experiences and the possibilities and limitations of my methodological choices.

(1) ON BEING AN ENGAGED, FEMINIST RESEARCHER

Low's (2011) understanding of an engaged anthropology provides an initial framework for this chapter, which she defines as:

> …those activities that grow out of a commitment to the informants and communities with whom anthropologists work and a value-based stance that anthropological research respect the dignity and rights of all people and have a beneficent effect on the promotion of social justice. (Low, 2011: 390)

Low (2011) shares that an engaged anthropology has taken shape in her own work by rendering visible inequalities and uncovering social segregations. For example, she has explored how gentrification, privatization schemes, and urban planning spatially inscribe racism and class divides, "encod[ing] local places with hegemonic and exclusionary forms and meanings" (2011: 390). Low's research also provides informants with a framework and language with which to evaluate their everyday lives, experiences, and surroundings, as well as offers them—and social advocates, policy makers, and political organizations—a foundation with which to challenge the institutions, systems, and processes that uphold their subordination (2011: 390). This understanding of engagement, then, emphasizes the value of producing knowledge that can elucidate social problems, their systemic roots, and how they impact local communities.

Scheper-Hughes (2009) writes about *with whom* this type of anthropological knowledge should be shared. She argues for a "public" anthropology that disseminates anthropological knowledge with a wider—more public—audience, thereby making the

discipline more accountable and accessible (2009: 1). She argues that a public anthropology harbors liberatory potentials, both within the discipline and "for humanity itself" (Scheper-Hughes, 2009: 3). Public anthropology might be achieved by writing for major media publications, taking on documentary filmmaking projects, and attending congressional hearings, for example. Additionally, a public anthropology makes issues of public concern "to bear on anthropological thinking and practice," and moreover, *makes* issues public that might otherwise be neglected in the public sphere (2009: 2). Finally, she warns those of us relatively new to academia not to be "overly cautious in expressing heterodox views or taking heretical positions," and concludes with the provocative question, "If anthropology cannot be put to service as a tool for human liberation why are we bothering with it at all?" (Scheper-Hughes, 2009: 3).

How research is produced matters, too, and several anthropologists have highlighted the importance of considering the process by which anthropological knowledge is made. For example, Olesen (2011) argues for more collaboration between researchers and interlocutors and against a "top-down" approach to knowledge production, which can reinforce hierarchies as well as limit the knowledge produced. Similar arguments have been made in favor of collaborative research by Lassiter (2005) and Rappaport (2008). Others have centered the importance of reflexivity and positionality. For example, Abu-Lughod (1991) writes about feminist and "halfie" anthropologists (those of us who blur the distinction between researcher and the researched). Halfies and feminist researchers are people for whom "the 'other" that the anthropologist studies is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self" (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 468). Some decolonial feminists advocate for

anthropology "at home," while recognizing the complexities in the meaning of "home" and what distinguishes it from the "field" (see: Boylorn, 2016; Orchard and Dewey, 2016).

Value-based research may not sit comfortably with everyone. Scheper-Hughes (2009), for instance, goes as far as arguing that public anthropology is, ironically, best kept private if one is to survive in the academy. Making anthropology more public risks erasing the person (or people) who produced that knowledge, as well as invites scorn from academics for "dumbing down" the discipline (2009: 2). Others, by contrast, may fear that advocacy and knowledge are not only unlikely bedfellows but altogether irreconcilable principles. For example, even though the discipline has recognized that all texts are situated since the *Writing Culture* debate (see: Clifford et al., 1986), many writers "still seem reluctant to examine the implications of the actual situatedness of their knowledge" (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 468). However, as Hale (2001: 13) argues, "there is no necessary contradiction between active political commitment to resolving a problem, and rigorous scholarly research on that problem." Activist research may even "lead to better research outcomes: deeper and more thorough empirical knowledge of the problem at hand, as well as theoretical understanding that would otherwise be difficult to achieve" (Hale, 2001: 13). Additionally, although engaged anthropologists cannot escape questions of positionality, they can nevertheless make their relationships, viewpoints, and biases more explicit. Low (2003), for example, does this by "by interposing memoir and interviews…[to] elucidate the interconnection between the author and her subject" (2003: 24); others embrace autoethnography, where the self is a central to anthropological theorizing and is positioned to elucidate greater social "truths" (Boon, Butler and Jeffries, 2018; Ettorre, 2017). Several Black academics have argued that Black feminist authoethnography can even act as a means

of resistance in an academy (and society) that overlooks their work, silences their emotions, and fails to bear witness to the systemic racism they endure (Griffin, 2012; Osei, 2019).

Nevertheless, value-based research merits caution, given that anthropological knowledge has historically been motivated by colonial and imperial ambitions and philosophies, something which must be actively resisted (Harrison, 2010). Moreover, any kind of engaged anthropology comes with its own set of challenges, too, like navigating inevitable power dynamics in fieldwork, attempting to speak "for" and speak "from" (see Spivak, 1988), and juggling expectations of both research institutions and participants. Patai (1994) describes this predicament of grappling with scholarship and feminist social justice as holding "dual allegiances," a concept that can apply not only to the feminist/research dynamic, but also to the many paradoxical positionalities that an engaged researcher may hold. While feminist academics must commit to transformative politics, to succeed within academia, they must also adhere to guidelines and expectations set out by their institutions and disciplines (Patai, 1994: 23).

This chapter follows in the footsteps of other researchers who embrace the messy, uncomfortable, but morally engaging aspects of engaged anthropology. As Kleinman writes, "[a]nalyzing field data within a feminist frameworks means that we pay attention to inequality" (2007: 7); it does not entail, however, that these methodologies can eradicate inequality entirely. Rather than reconciling dual allegiances or outlining a perfectly egalitarian methodology, I explore how being a researcher, feminist, bookshop worker, and human with a myriad of personal identities influenced my fieldwork, shaped my relationships, and informed my findings and perspectives. I share the ways in which I was pushed to confront and acknowledge power dynamics in which I was embedded. Finally, I

emphasize the importance of understanding my positionality to situate my analyses while challenging the possibility and desirability of value-neutral research (see also: Abu-Lughod, 1990, 1991; O'Reilly, 2009; Wolf, 1996). To quote Abu-Lughod:

> I am less concerned with the existential consequences of this split . . . than with the awareness such splits generate about three crucial issues: positionality, audience, and the power inherent in distinctions of self and other. (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 469)

I now turn the reader's attention to the following aspects of my methodology: fieldwork in a safer space, positionality and participants, interviews and other spaces, and anonymity.

(2) FIELDWORK

(2.1) FINDING POCKETBOOKS

When I first arrived in New York, I was simply looking for a place with like-minded people where I could hang out during the day, ideally in Downtown Manhattan. I had just returned to the city after several years of absence (I did my undergraduate degree in New York, so I was familiar with the city) and was embarking on my doctoral research—which, at the time, was set to be carried out with a Jewish anti-Zionist activist group. I had very few friends who still lived in the city, and I lived a 90-minute commute away from the meeting site of that activist group. After a quick Google search for "feminist bookstore NYC," I learned that Pocketbooks—the only feminist bookstore in the city—was only a 20-minute walk from my intended field site.

Upon my first visit, I was immediately taken in by the curated book selection (these were the kind of books that occupied a shelf at most in mainstream bookshops), the DIY

(do-it-yourself) aesthetic of the shop (especially the handwritten signs and large zine selection), and the laidback atmosphere (the workers were dressed casually and seemed to be "hanging out" with friends as much as they were working). I soon learned that Pocketbooks was entirely volunteer run, and before having any intentions to carry out fieldwork there, I applied to volunteer. I figured it would be an easy way to make some friends, and it would give me an excuse to spend time near the place where I was originally intending to carry out fieldwork. In July 2015, the volunteer coordinator approved my application, and soon thereafter, I was undergoing training for a weekly Tuesday afternoon shift. At our orientation, we discussed the Safer Space Policy, and I immediately felt like I belonged. I was still involved with a couple of online feminist safe spaces (one was a self-care group, and another was for general feminist theory discussion), and I not only felt as though my experiences as a woman were understood without me having to explain them (which was a relief), but I had also made several friends through them.

Around the time of my volunteer training, I noticed that safe spaces were regularly making media headlines. Although safe spaces had been a place of learning, political and feminist awakening, and healing for me, they were being depicted as tyrannical places that suppress debate and coddle younger generations. Meanwhile, the more interesting challenges I had witnessed in creating and maintaining safe spaces were completely overlooked. Given anthropology's unique position to elucidate theoretical concepts and social relationships by observing on-the-ground realities, I decided to change my fieldwork to the bookshop—to exploring what it means for a place to act as a "safe space," and to interrogate the meaning(s) of safety more broadly. Unlike the safe spaces with which I was

most familiar, Pocketbooks also offered the unique aspect of having a physical location with a more materially observable history.

Even though my positionality blurs the boundary between the "self" and "other"—after all—I am both a feminist (whose principles and politics broadly align with Pocketbooks'), as well as a researcher—this dual allegiance was key to unlocking Pocketbooks as a field site. It is an informal rule at Pocketbooks that you cannot simply "observe"— you must participate—and a pre-condition of participating is sharing and upholding Pocketbooks' values. For example, potential volunteers must fill out an application and may be refused based on their motivations to volunteer, as well as whether their values overlap with the community's. Moreover, I am reminded of an incident during a discussion group (on the topic of safer spaces, no less). A customer interrupted us and asked if it was okay if she listened in on our conversation; she then told us that she was from out of town but finds the shop "simply fascinating." Those of us within the discussion group were told to raise our hands if we were okay with her observing, but no one did. Because discussion groups often require personal vulnerability and sensitivity to others, having an outsider join purely out of personal interest (with no desire to engage, be a part of that conversation, or be a member of the community) feels like unsafe observation. While not everyone in the Pocketbooks community is friends (or even knows one another), there is nevertheless a crucial element of trust that comes with knowing that everyone is working towards the same goals. An outsider, however, makes no commitment to these goals, so why should the community invite them into their private conversations?

Had I been a researcher with no personal connection to the community's mission, or if I did not also participate like any other volunteer, I doubt I would have been granted

permission to carry out fieldwork in the shop (or any access I was granted would have been limited). I had greater access to the inner workings of the store and internal debates precisely because I approached the space from a feminist standpoint; arguably, it is a prerequisite for entry, rather than a stumbling block. To add to Hale's (2001) argument that activist research can produce better outcomes, I would add that it might be the *only* way to produce some research. Communities that may be open to someone explicitly committed to tackling political issues (i.e., the activist, engaged, and/or feminist anthropologist) might be closed to someone who presents themselves as neutral or politically disengaged.

Being able to integrate into the Pocketbooks community as a volunteer allowed me to experience firsthand how it feels to work in and cultivate a safe space, and to experience and evaluate power dynamics (after all, I was embedded in these relationships, too, not removed from them). I became a true *participant* of the space, not merely an observer. As I share in the remainder of this chapter, and touch upon throughout this thesis, this duality in my positionality afforded me greater insights into my research questions but also presented some awkward and uncomfortable moments, too.

(2.2) THE FIELDWORK EXPERIENCE

The organizational structure at Pocketbooks consists of volunteers, Staffers, and Collective members.[4] Volunteers typically worked 3-hour shifts; Staffers worked 6-hour shifts, held bookstore keys, and had monthly meetings with Collective members; Collective

[4] These three designations were the official worker names/categories given by the Pocketbooks community; they are not names I have personally assigned.

members worked even more shifts and held legal responsibilities. Despite these different worker classifications, all workers could also be classified as "volunteers," since nobody was paid. As such "volunteer" can be used to describe one specific category of worker (those who worked 3-hour shifts) or broadly to refer to all bookshop workers. The differences between these worker categories are explored in more depth in Chapter 7.

Although I never became a Collective member, I experienced Pocketbooks both as a volunteer and as a Staffer.[5] From July to December 2015, I worked as a Pocketbooks volunteer, holding a weekly Tuesday afternoon shift (3 – 6 pm). When not on shift, I passed time in the bookshop most days of the week. I would read books and observe peoples' interactions while sitting in the café area, browse the bookshelves, or attend daily events. These seven months were characterized primarily by various aspects of learning, such as: attempting to grasp everyday store operations (e.g. learning to properly use the register so I would not overcharge customers by mistake); familiarizing myself with Pocketbooks' titles, inventory, and the spatial divisions of the shop; learning how to work within a non-hierarchical structure; and developing a sense of who the "core" community members were—namely, Collective members and some of the Staffers.

While this period was educational and informative, it was also the time when I most felt like a community outsider. While I was an insider in the most basic sense because I was a volunteer rather than just a customer, for the most part, I felt detached from any real sense of behind-the-scenes organization and decision making, and I did not feel a deep sense of community belonging. When I frequented the store off shift, for instance, most other

[5] It is worth acknowledging, though, that these categorizations are somewhat arbitrary. People often moved between roles; after all, I was first a volunteer and then a Staffer; many people who volunteer were first customers, and several customers were past volunteers.

volunteers did not recognize me, and although I was learning how to sell books, I was not involved in any discussions or incidents that probed some of the questions I was hoping to answer, such as: How is conflict resolved in a safer space? Whose needs and safety are prioritized when peoples' needs clash? Who can amend the safer space policy itself? Despite feeling like I had not truly "reached" the inner-most community at Pocketbooks, what I came to realize that this experience resonated with many other volunteers, and it would eventually inform and shape my approach to writing about the structural organization in the shop and its effects on the community.

Nevertheless, hoping to be more involved with behind-the-scenes organizing, in December 2015, I wrote to the Collective members signaling my interest in becoming a Staffer, to which they agreed. Shortly thereafter, I became a co-Staffer on Tuesday afternoons, a responsibility I shared with a Collective member. Marking my newfound position, I was given a set of keys to the store and was added to the Staffer email listserv.[6] If my time as a volunteer could be characterized by learning and feeling isolated, my period as a Staffer, which lasted from December 2015 until I departed at the end of September 2016, was characterized by intensive community involvement, internal conflict and debate, insider information and tasks, and more complex power dynamics. Not only did I have greater access to information and community, which allowed me further insights into some of my broader questions about safe spaces, but I also gained a firsthand perspective on what it feels like to navigate the community as a Staffer, rather than as a volunteer.

[6] Here, "listserv" refers to the Pocketbooks emailing list.

One of the most significant changes in becoming a Staffer was that I attended monthly (sometimes bi-monthly) meetings with other Staffers and Collective members. These meetings would usually last a few hours and were based on a collectively agreed upon agenda. These meetings not only afforded me access into to that were being made, but also allowed me to get a feel for decision-making processes, the key values and considerations people raised, and the language used as participants debated one another. I also developed a better sense of relationships between specific people: who had unspoken alliances, who tended to agree and disagree with one another, and who prioritized certain issues over others. The Pocketbooks community—and the Collective especially—were no longer mythological names but people I interacted with directly. I developed closer relationships and trust with other Staffers, too. Similarly, the Staffer listserv (an email chain for Staffers and collective members) also gave me an "in" to discussions and debates about the store, including editing the Safer Space Policy, community members who broke the policy, and debates about hierarchy, for instance.

Through these in-person meetings and online discussions, I was also able to participate in project work with other volunteers, including the following: planning, launching and moderating a safer spaces discussion forum for all volunteers, Staffers, and Collective members; doing the same for a consensus and decision-making forum; and writing a Staffer agreement outlining Staffers' rights and responsibilities. All three of these projects required my active participation over the course of several months and involved close cooperation with other volunteers and Staffers. Some questions I considered while engaging in these projects included: What safety and accessibility issues must we anticipate in hosting bookshop-based forums, and how can we make these discussions as safe as

possible? How can safety be ensured or moderated without it being enforced from the top-down and (re)producing hierarchy? Who should be allowed to participate in decision making in a non-hierarchical space? By engaging in this project work, I not only observed the process of creating a safer space but experienced the same intellectual and emotional labor that other participants did, too.

Integrating into the community came with its challenges, too. For example, I found myself increasingly distressed during periods of intra-community conflict. Although I was aware of community tensions even only weeks into volunteering, my personal sense of discomfort grew with my increased participation and involvement. Not only did I know people better and want to avoid hurting peoples' feelings, but as I developed my own opinions and feelings about the issues that had catalyzed these conflicts, I found it more difficult to keep to myself; moreover, I did not know if I *should* keep them to myself. I found myself asking whether I should remove myself from these debates or immerse myself more fully. I worried that if I participated *too* much, I might alienate some people and then having more lopsided data/interviews. In that case, would the voices of those I disagreed with be more absent from my work simply because we did not see eye to eye? By contrast, not engaging in these debates and sharing my opinions felt both inauthentic and could be a barrier to developing more trusting relationships with people with whom I shared a similar outlook. Additionally, I recognized that the more I did participate in community debates and conflict, the more access I had to information that was often withheld in more "public" conversations. As such, I had to grapple with whether utilizing peoples' frustrations and struggles as "data" is a form of taking advantage of an unpleasant situation for

personal/research gain. What do I owe to the Pocketbooks community? And to those who read and consume my research?

While these are questions that I have continued to ask myself even after returning from fieldwork, the beauty of doing engaged research is not that it necessarily provides answers to these questions but instead provokes new ways of questioning our positionalities and methodologies. My hope is that in being transparent about this dual role is that the reader can more easily contextualize my research, my findings, and my arguments—and question them, too. Moreover, I hope to convince the reader that despite these complexities in my role, it has afforded me with greater firsthand insight into the experience of creating a safe space (including the affective aspect of the process) and has also made me a more conscientious researcher.

Finally, volunteering as a bookshop worker allowed me to give something to the community who was, in turn, giving something to me, too. At Pocketbooks, volunteers frequently told customers that the best way to support the shop is to buy books, but where financial barriers prohibit spending, the next best option is volunteering their time. After all, the shop relies on volunteers to stay open; without the commitment of volunteers, the shop would not have the financial means to exist in the first place. In the process of collecting "data," then, my fieldwork allowed me to give back to the community—something I think is crucial for any kind of engaged anthropology.

(2.3) THE EXTENDED FIELD: INTERVIEWS AND COMMUTES

While participant observation was my primary form of data collection, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Collective members, Staffers, volunteers, project bottom-liners,[7] forum and event hosts, and customers. Most of these interviews were voice recorded (if permission was given); interviews usually lasted at least an hour but averaged around two hours, and the longest was nearly five hours. Because my main interest was the ways in which the volunteer community attempts to actualize the Pocketbooks mission by making the shop a safer space, I prioritized interviewing the volunteer workers (Collective members, Staffers, volunteers, project bottom-liners), since they are most directly involved in running the store—be it through daily interactions or more ongoing decisions and project work. Also, I felt it would be too intrusive—and potentially unsafe by Pocketbooks' standards—to hassle customers for interviews. Personal boundaries are of utmost importance at Pocketbooks, and I did not feel comfortable approaching people without being invited.[8]

Although I was initially worried that approaching strangers might limit my research findings, it provided yet another opportunity for me to think through how to engage with people in safer ways. Recognizing and respecting boundaries, questioning how to safely initiate conversation (and what kinds of conversations), and leaning towards caution, for example, are fundamental to the experience of participating in a safer space—not just for a researcher, but for any participant of that space. As such, my experiences of negotiating whom to approach (and how to approach them) acted as a means of *participating* in the safer

[7] Project bottom-liners could be volunteers, Staffers, or Collective members, and they were responsible for a particular project (like running the café).
[8] Naturally, because many customers were quite friendly—or were friends with volunteers—I did interview some customers, which almost always arose out of casual conversations rather than from a deliberate attempt to seek them out.

space community and culture—rather than a barrier to understanding them—even if it meant I interviewed fewer strangers than I had initially anticipated.

When inviting people for interviews, I would present the option of meeting at Pocketbooks or at another place of their choosing, usually at a café or public park. Interestingly, most people chose to meet somewhere other than Pocketbooks because they felt they would be able to speak more freely about the shop. People often shared intimate details about themselves that they did not want everyone in Pocketbooks to hear and/or simply felt more able to share criticisms of the space in a more private setting. Others knew that they would be interrupted in the store, because it is such a social space.

Carrying out interviews in places other than Pocketbooks not only allowed me to have more in-depth and personal conversations with participants, but it also afforded me the opportunity to think through notions boundaries and boundedness and the extent to which my field site ends at (or extends beyond) Pocketbooks' front door. For example, does the protocol and language expected from each other at Pocketbooks apply to us when we are outside of the shop, and what does the answer suggest about the purpose/mission of the community? What does it say about safety and boundaries that people felt safer to have some conversations outside of the safer space? The spaces beyond the confines of bookstore walls—such as the interview spaces—should be considered part of my ethnographic field site as they were key to my theoretical analysis, too.

Moreover, my commute between my home and the bookshop also facilitated new ways of thinking about the boundedness and the connectedness of space, as well as helped me develop a more personal relationship with the shop as a safer space—not only one that was safe for other community members, but for me, too. During my fieldwork, I lived a 90-

minute commute away from Pocketbooks in an apartment in the Bronx; these long subway journeys did not only carry me to the "field" but were also integral to my fieldwork experience. One notable incident occurred on my way to a Tuesday shift. A male stranger had been staring at me for quite some time, but despite my closed physical cues (arms crossed, eyes to the ground, slight scowl), he nevertheless approached me to ask if he could photography me sometime. Despite refusing his offer multiple times, he insisted on thrusting a piece of paper into my pocket with his Instagram account and phone number anyway. Out of curiosity, I later looked at the man's Instagram, which was covered in semi-nude photographs of women and femmes who often looked like they were unaware he had been photographing them.

While this incident might sound relatively insignificant, it was yet another reminder of the ways in which men feel entitled to my body and refuse to accept "no" as an answer. Moreover, my first thought was that I could not wait to get to Pocketbooks. Not only did I know that I was unlikely to receive this kind of unwanted attention in the shop, but I know that I could explain what happened to me without having to unpack why it felt—for lack of a better word—"icky." Incidentally, several other women at Pocketbooks had been harassed by this very man and felt my unease firsthand, so not only did I feel understood, but I also felt a sense of camaraderie, solidarity, and even shared anger. Despite the unpleasantness of the journey, my experience of everyday structural violence elsewhere had only made me feel more connected to Pocketbooks as a safer space; it was the first incident where I felt like I need the community—as a woman who had just been harassed, not as a researcher per se.

By contrast, sometimes my commutes forced me to me confront my own privilege(s) and question who does not have access to a safe space, or for whom a safe space cannot help

in any way that might materially matter. An unhoused woman, who I must have encountered on a dozen or two subway commutes, stands out in my memory. She had a large cyst on her cheekbone which protruded past her nose; she told us that health professionals refused to remove it because it was non-cancerous, despite it being incredibly painful. She was told that if she wanted to remove it, because it was considered a "cosmetic" procedure, she would receive no financial assistance from the government or healthcare system. As such, she took to asking those of us on the train to contribute to her fund (she needed a few thousand dollars). Inevitably, this made me question the ways in which Pocketbooks helps those who need it most and which types of systemic violence can be disrupted—and those which remain untouched—in a safer space. Pocketbooks might help someone like me who experiences harassment on a subway, but what about people more vulnerable than me?

I share these reflections to emphasize that safe spaces cannot be studied in a vacuum because they are embedded within structures of power and domination that permeate all levels of society; therefore, my "field" should not only be considered the bookstore alone but must include my other places of movement, occupation, and conversation. Indeed, as I argued in the previous chapter, a mistake that people often make is de-contextualizing safe spaces from the societies, institutions, and wider social relations in which they are embedded. Widening my understanding of "field" also allows me to observe not only how violence is not reconceptualized and challenged within Pocketbooks but how "violence is reworked through the routines of daily life as well as enacted through social relations and social institutions" (Green, 2004: 320). My experiences reaffirm my conviction that considering that which exists "outside" of a safer space is the only way to make meaning of the space itself.

(3) Reflections on power, safety, and engagement: positionality and anonymity

(3.1) Participants and positionality

As anthropologists have become more conscious of the neocolonial undertones (and potential dangers) of studying the "exotic other," there has been a shift towards an "anthropology at home." One of the ideas behind an anthropology at home is that it might overcome some of the power dynamics, ethnocentric misconceptions, and practical barriers to studying a culture that the researcher is not part of. While doing anthropology at home is by no means the only kind of field site for an engaged researcher, the appeal is evident: in theory, there is less risk of being the privileged outsider writing about a disadvantaged culture and reproducing that inequality in some way—be that through how research is carried out, the categories by which the culture is conceptualized (which leads to room for misrepresentation and ethnocentrism), or how the data is shared and published.

Of course, this is a simplified description of anthropology at home. Even if a researcher studies a culture that they are part of (or from), they still have some privilege imbued by their institution and by having authority as the researcher. Moreover, as I explore in this section, even where a researcher is "at home," a home culture is not a monolith. To be at home does not mean to be free from power dynamics or to be "like" everyone in that community. Nevertheless, I consider my research an example of anthropology at home, not only because I am American, lived in New York City for six years (prior to fieldwork), and was a bookstore volunteer, but because I share in many of the identities and values of the community that comprises my participants. Because I did my research in such a place, I feel

like I can better represent the community from the inside and sidestep some of the potential pitfalls of studying cultures I am more removed from.

Most people active at Pocketbooks were between the ages of twenty and thirty, although there were also a few people in their teens, thirties, and forties. In addition, volunteers were overwhelmingly university educated—many were still in university, some were in graduate programs, and others had recently graduated. The person I became closest to was, coincidentally, also enrolled in a PhD program. Most volunteers identified as queer, and many of them also identified as genderqueer, non-binary, or transgender. There were generally fewer men in the space than women; most people were either women or some minority gender. And despite being a so-called "queer" space, it was much more geared towards queer women, feminine-aligned people, and gender non-conforming people; there were very few cisgender gay men in the space. Although there were several people of color, it was still an overwhelmingly white community. In terms of class, most people were highly educated, which inevitably affords social privilege; however, many people also struggled to pay rent and relied on state benefits. Many, if not most, people identified as survivors, usually of sexual violence and domestic abuse.

Unsurprisingly, due to the political nature of the store, everyone held what would generally be considered "leftist" values—and anti-assimilationist ones at that. While there was variety in the details, people shared a general commitment to dismantling systems of oppression and most people identified with labels like anarchist, socialist, Marxist, and/or feminist. During the 2016 presidential election, most people preferred Bernie Sanders but were nevertheless skeptical of party politics; there was a minority of Hillary Clinton supporters, some volunteers who opted out of voting, and others who voted on behalf of

incarcerated people who were ineligible to vote. People occupied all sorts of other jobs, including but not limited to artist, social worker, educator, retail worker, engineer, lawyer, university student, doctoral candidate, engineer, photographer, librarian, waiter, and computer scientist. Quantifying the number of participants is challenging, but there were typically 80 active volunteers, 20 or so Staffers, between four and eight Collective members, and a dozen project bottom-liners at any given time. The individuals who occupied these groups, however, varied throughout the year (people often came to volunteer for short periods of time). In addition, there was also a larger pool of people on the email listserv who would take someone's shift if the regular volunteer could not make it.

At the time of writing, one problem is that too few people who are active in safe spaces write about them; most often these writers are outsiders, who inevitably impose their own understandings of categories like "safety" and "risk" onto "safe space." Sharing in many of these identities—and values—allowed me to fit in with the Pocketbooks community and feel like I was carrying out research amongst peers. Nevertheless, even in a community with many shared traits and values, there are inevitably differences, and I could not relate to or account for all perspectives and experiences. Poignantly, Griffin (2012), a Black feminist autoethnographer writes about her own positionality:

> Although forces of systemic oppression have been and continue to be imposed upon my life, to voice my anger reflects privilege alongside marginalization because many without reprieve or recourse live with their anger, ending their lives long before the promise of death delivers. (Griffin, 2012: 145)

Like Griffin, despite my own experiences of subordination (significantly different from Griffin's, it should be noted), I nevertheless hold privileges that not only facilitate me to carry out research, but that also complicate the notion of anthropology at "home." If the

researcher is not careful, clinging to the idea that research at home is less exploitative can erase differences within that community.

For example, despite holding multiple oppressed identities, I am also white, cisgender, and university educated. Because of my privileges, I still run into some of the issues that an anthropologist studying an "exotic other" might encounter, like restricted access to conversations (which necessarily skews the information and "data" I collect), as well as reinforcing unequal power dynamics (even when I might have good intentions). One encounter stands out in my memory for forcing me to confront my whiteness and its impact on my research. During one of my volunteering shifts, another Staffer made an offhand comment that the high-school interns discuss inane topics rather than taking advantage of what the shop offers. His comment was directed at two Black interns, and another Staffer—who was also Black—replied: "No, they have those interesting political conversations. But when a white person walks by, they shut up." Even though this Staffer's comment was not directed at me personally, it pointed to the fact that there may be major gaps in my knowledge of the space—especially as it pertains to race. The overwhelming whiteness of the community was often identified as a problem, and I was part of the group that contributed to this racial dynamic, even if unwittingly so.

Of course, this limitation does not entail that I cannot or should not write about race, racism, or other issues I might not experience personally; if anything, it provides more impetus to pay close attention to these matters and amplify voices of color, for example. But this shortcoming also points to room for improvement in future research. Something like collaborative research—where researchers themselves can tap into more varied identities, experiences, and conversations—might allow for a more comprehensive and nuanced

perspective(s). A single person cannot represent "home" when a "home" houses such a heterogenous community in the first place.

In my dissertation, I make every effort to amplify the voices of people of color, transgender volunteers, neuroatypical people, and others who have experiences and identities different from my own. But as researchers have acknowledged, exploitation is inevitable in all fieldwork, and although we can try to minimize power inequalities, no research is likely to ever be fully egalitarian (Lewin and Silverstein, 2016: 24). Ultimately, issues of power, domination, and exploitation will arise in ethnographic research; they cannot be circumvented or eliminated. And "[n]o matter how 'inside' an ethnographer might be, she always had the privilege of movement or departure, and multiple choices for defining her identity" (Lewin & Silverstein, 2016: 13). A perfectly feminist approach simply does not exist (see: Wolf, 1996: 38)—or any engaged approach for that matter. Nevertheless, I strive to be transparent about my positionality and make legible these potential power imbalances so that the reader has an opportunity to read my work critically, too.

(3.2) THE ANONYMITY PARADOX

The issue of anonymity is not straightforward in a safer space. As I discovered during fieldwork, there is a tension between privacy and visibility when carrying out politically meaningful—and arguably, safe—research. Although ensuring privacy and anonymity might be considered "safe" research practice because doing so protects participants from watchful eyes within their community and/or elsewhere, the lack of visibility, acknowledgment, and accountability that accompanies anonymity comes at a cost,

too. As several activist anthropologists have argued, one potential way of making research more egalitarian is by being more collaborative in the process of conducting fieldwork and/or during the writing and publishing phase (Lassiter, 2005; Low and Merry, 2010). Naming my participants would afford them recognition, and attributing their insights and quotations to them by name could confer to them more authority and power.

On the other hand, if participants remain anonymous, I become recognized as the "official researcher," as well as the "owner" of the knowledge put forth in my dissertation. Having an institution like the University of Oxford behind me already bestows authority to me; carrying out fieldwork and publishing it under my name only reinforces that power as the sole author. However, my research and dissertation are only possible because of the generosity, vulnerability, willingness, and knowledge of my participants. The people who participated in my research are reflective, intelligent, and astute individuals; we regularly engaged in dynamic conversations about safe spaces and related topics that feature prominently in my research. Adeyemi (2019) writes of participants of her research that they were "neoliberal subjects with acute critiques of neoliberalism's material effect" (2019: 550); the same is true for most people I encountered at Pocketbooks—which not only speaks to the intellectual milieu they represent (and the people they might exclude, a theme that surfaces throughout this thesis) but also suggests that they merit significant recognition for their contributions to my theorization, even if they were not explicit or "official" collaborators.

In addition, as one of my friends and Pocketbooks volunteers said, "the idea that anyone can own knowledge is total crap," because knowledge is always cumulative—built upon layers of continued conversations and debate. This poststructuralist position (cf.

Barthes, 1967 on the "death of the author") is something that anthropologists who practice the methodology of "duoethnography" embrace: "the importance of dialog and the role of 'the Other' in understanding a phenomenon, as knowledge is not created in a vacuum" (Schultz, 2017: 504).

Nevertheless, there are convincing arguments for providing anonymity to a field site and to participants, especially as it pertains to their safety, protection, and other desires. Most importantly, it is something that many (though not all) volunteers asked for. Mistakenly, I initially assumed that participants wanted anonymity for protection from those outside of the Pocketbooks community. What I learned, however, was that participants were primarily concerned with other volunteers discovering what they had said in interviews with me and the potential for interpersonal fallout. Anonymity *within* and *from* the Pocketbooks community were their primary concerns.

In line with participants' wishes, I provide as much anonymity to participants as possible—even if doing so clashes with my instinct to give credit where it is due. Not only do I use pseudonyms throughout my thesis, but I also use multiple pseudonyms for each individual; in one section, I might refer to *Person-A* as "Bob" and in the next section refer to *Person-A* as "Harold." While participants may nevertheless still be able to identify one other based on other information or by their quotations, having pseudonyms that change make it harder to track which comments belong to a which person. I tend to refer to all workers as "volunteers," as well, except where worker differences have significant relevance to their comments and perspectives.

Additionally, even though no one voiced concerns about protecting the anonymity of the shop as a whole, "Pocketbooks" is still a pseudonym for the shop, although a false name

for a bookshop as unique as this one can only provide so much anonymity. The anonymity I aim to provide for my interviewees is significantly more protective than the pseudonymization of the bookshop. The history of the shop and neighborhood, as well as copies of its Mission Statement and Safer Space Policy, were too integral to my analysis to truly anonymize the shop itself, and most of this information is publicly available, in any case.

One of the downsides to increasing anonymity is the potential for readers to feel they might not know any of the participants intimately. Given that I do not follow a handful of individuals and share their personal journeys, the reader might struggle to develop a kind of relationship with them. To account for this potential loss, I have added sections between chapters that give a sense of the types of people who comprise the Pocketbooks community and what our interactions were like. Some of these interlude sections include fictionalized versions of actual conversations I had with participants. The people I describe in these sections are composite characters, an amalgamation of actual people I met and interacted with in the bookstore, rather than descriptive of any single person. Doing so still allows me to anonymize peoples' identities and lives but also enables me to foster a greater sense of intimacy between the reader and the people they are reading about.

Navigating this tension between visibility and anonymity—and the question of which value ultimately makes people safer—featured in discussions at Pocketbooks, too. Chapter 7, for example, focuses on how Pocketbooks volunteers negotiate these paradoxes and considers what happens when a community disagrees over what constitutes the safest practices. As such, the same type of consciousness raising, questioning, and debating that I witnessed as a participant observer were being mirrored in my own methodological

decision-making process, affording me once more with an opportunity to grapple with the same kind of questions inherent to the project of cultivating safer space. The conversations I witnessed and partook in about how visibility and anonymity should fit into the shop's organizational structure also provoked me to question what anthropologists should consider "safe" research. Perhaps safe research is not only a matter of having our ethics forms approved and demonstrating participants will not be harmed, but about actively attempting to mitigate structural violence and webs of power that we find ourselves—and participants—entangled in.

(3.3) OTHER ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS: CONSENT, OBSERVATION, AND INFORMATION SHARING

Consent is essential for carrying out any ethical research. In a non-hierarchical organization, however, it is less obvious whom to approach to ask for permission to carry out research there and identifying what information can be shared. The issue becomes more complicated when one of the biggest divides within the community is precisely the question of how transparent the organization should be—both within the community itself and with a wider public audience. Participant observation, despite being the most utilized methods in anthropology, is not straightforward in a safe space, where the ethics of observation (and information sharing) are considered political issues.

Initially, I approached the Collective by email to ask if I could carry out my fieldwork in the shop, to which they responded yes, but to make sure I gained consent from individuals I wanted to feature, too. Nevertheless, having permission to do fieldwork is not the same thing as having people's trust and being able to engage in the conversations

necessary for meaningful research. To build trust, I informed almost everyone I met that I was doing anthropological fieldwork; I never wanted to catch anyone off guard or for them to feel like I had been secretly (and non-consensually) observing them. Moreover, I delved into active participation of the shop, including giving my own input into decision making and sharing my opinions in discussion groups, so that people could get a sense of me as a person and what values I prioritize. When appropriate, I also shared personal details about myself and allowed friendships to develop organically. This way, when I asked people if they would like to be interviewed, they would already be aware that I was doing research and could judge for themselves whether I was someone they trusted to be interviewed by.

There was no rulebook for what information could be shared in my research and what could not, but I have erred on the side of caution. I have omitted all information that could legally or otherwise incriminate any participant, regardless of the context in which they have shared that information. Because observation was often considered intrusive and non-consensual (much like surveillance),[9] I have prioritized sharing quotes from participants that were given in interviews rather than conversations I overheard (unless I then checked in with them after).[10] Consent for interviews was given verbally, and interviewees could choose the location of our interviews (usually a different café, sometimes outdoors, and rarely at Pocketbooks). Most observations I have shared were either observable to any member of the public (e.g., visual aspects of the shop), were not considered confidential or contentious, or came from activities that I was directly engaged in myself. Although

[9] I recall an instance of a random photographer taking people in the shop without permission, to which the Staffer on call said to him, "Dude! This is a safer space. You can't be doing this!" While taking photographs without consent is quite different to doing research, it speaks to the idea that observation (without permission) constitutes an act of violence.

[10] Please note: When quoting participants, I have adopted the convention of an ellipsis (three dots) to signify the omission of a few words and a period plus ellipsis (four dots) to signify longer omissions between sentences.

autoethnography is not one of my primary methods, I insert autoethnographic moments where vulnerability is necessary to make a theoretical point; turning observation inward towards myself enabled me to include observational moments without necessarily relying on the vulnerability of others.

Nevertheless, certain sequences of events and conversations—which I was privy to primarily because of my role as a Staffer—were more ethically challenging in terms of what information I could share in good faith. This was the case for community disputes about hierarchy (and transparency), as well as community fallout (which now comprise the bulk of Chapter 7). I discuss these issues in more depth in Chapter 7.

CONCLUSION

While there may be no single paradigm for what engaged research looks like, in my own experience, being engaged looked like deliberately and intentionally engaging with these ethical questions about safety and violence—especially as they pertained to my methodological choices and positionality. That I got to deliberate these questions in a space where others were just as committed to identifying and confronting power imbalances, to being self-reflexive, and to questioning the status quo, only facilitated my own ability to think more thoughtfully and critically—and with humility, too. Moreover, that I am now in a place where I am questioning what constitutes "safe" research is a testament to the Pocketbooks community and the kind of consciousness raising possible in places that look critically at manifestations of violence, a theme that continues to unfold in the following chapters.

INTERLUDE 2



Figure 4: On the left is a jar of vegan chocolate chip cookies for sale; center depicts a table of books with the cafe area (a few tables and chairs) behind it; on the right is a photo of a badge for sale that reads, "bad bitch."

We've just completed a few rounds of jump squats and push-ups, and my peripheral vision starts to darken, dots quickly creeping into my center view. Although I've been having some unexplained health issues lately and have been in and out of hospital, doctors have been unable to diagnose me with anything. Before I know it, I've collapsed onto the closest surface trying to not lose consciousness.

Chrissy, who is teaching our self-defense class, brings me over to a chair in the café area and asks another volunteer to grab me a cup of coffee and a vegan chocolate chip cookie from behind the counter. I'm embarrassed but grateful. A few of the other people in

the class come over to check on me and attempt to assuage my guilt by sharing stories of when they have felt vulnerable in similar situations. One volunteer tells me that she once sprained an ankle in a self-defense class at another workout studio in the city, but that she ended up making a good friend from the class. "And I mean, let's be real—self-defense classes are more about the people you meet than what you learn anyway," she tells me.

Once I'm feeling more myself, after five minutes or so, Chrissy resumes the class while I observe the remaining fifteen minutes. When it's over, she grabs herself a cup of coffee and joins me in the café area. She asks how I'm feeling, and I tell her about my frustrations about having an undiagnosed invisible illness. Even though doctors have been unable to determine what my condition is, I tell her that I'm relieved because at least my last hospital visit had an observable symptom for once. We talk about medical gaslighting—when doctors deny patients' symptoms or dismiss them as psychological. Although this is the first time we've met, I feel comfortable sharing with Chrissy because of how open she was with us in class about her violent adolescence.

When Chrissy learns that I'm doing a PhD, she tells me that she also hopes to do one abroad one day. She's eager to be interviewed and to share her life story with me, but before I ask her anything, she's interrupted by the arrival of her friend, Zach, who also grew up in the city and is involved with a nearby anarchist punk music venue. We decide to chat more formally by phone a few weeks later, but we spend over an hour together with Zach discussing what New York used to be like when they were younger. "Rachel," Zach tells me, "You have no idea what it used to be like here! Imagine a whole neighborhood like Pocketbooks." Chrissy chimes in that she misses her safe space. Her *what*? I make note to

press her about this comment later. At this point I've never heard about safe spaces being anything other than new, and I'm both confused and intrigued by her comment.

When there is no context for justice, freedom-seeking behavior is seen as annoying. Or futile. Or a drag. Or oppressive. And dismissed and dismissed and dismissed and dismissed until that behavior is finally just not seen.

— Sarah Schulman, *The gentrification of the mind: witness to a lost imagination*

CHAPTER 3 | A CITY SAFE FOR WHOM?: BEARING WITNESS TO GENTRIFICATION AND A CONTEXT FOR JUSTICE

> Gentrification has changed the East Village so dramatically in the past few decades, it's almost unrecognizable. I was holding hands with my girlfriend the other day, walking through SoHo to the West Village, and it felt like an act of transgression. I miss my gay neighborhood. I miss my safe space.
>
> —Chrissy, lesbian volunteer at Pocketbooks

INTRODUCTION

This chapter adopts a spatio-temporal approach to critically interrogating the meaning(s) of "safety" in Downtown Manhattan,[11] where Pocketbooks is located. I ask: How have local communities experienced Downtown Manhattan as (un)safe, and how has gentrification—a process often justified by improving peoples' quality of life and reducing crime—impacted and been impacted by people's relationships to these neighborhoods in the last few decades? By understanding what "safety" has meant to different populations in Downtown Manhattan—across space and time—I set the context for desiring safety (and safe spaces), a key step in a critical anthropology of safety, as I outlined in Chapter 1.

[11] Downtown Manhattan is the area below 14th Street in the borough of Manhattan. Pocketbooks is located in the Lower East Side in Downtown Manhattan, just on the border of the East Village (although sometimes Pocketbooks is sometimes considered part of the East Village due to its proximity and shared neighborhood culture). Pocketbooks volunteers typically understood the West Village, East Village, and Lower East Side as the neighborhood(s) most salient to Pocketbooks' history; they are the ones that came up most in conversations with participants and therefore the ones I focus on most in this chapter.

Drawing on themes from (counter)public literature and with an awareness of neoliberal urban (re)development tendencies, I explore the relationship between peoples' perceptions of (un)safety and feelings of belonging, while also situating this relationship within the city's geography and architectural landscape. Section 1 considers NYC in the 1980s and early 1990s when Downtown Manhattan was considered a haven for the LGBTQ+ community and many other marginalized populations. Meanwhile, Section 2 explores the gentrification and "cleaning up" of Downtown Manhattan, focusing on the implementation and impact of Mayor Giuliani's "quality of life" campaign on these neighborhoods, as well as the role(s) of local communities in the (re)development of the city. Throughout this chapter, I consider how both implicit and explicit references to safety and risk have shaped—and have been shaped by—the contours of belonging in the city, and in doing so, set the scene for the emergence of Pocketbooks as a safer space.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND BACKGROUND

My use of counterpublic language in this chapter draws inspiration from researchers who write about counterpublic space and who attempt to bridge the gap between the social and the spatial in (counter)public literature. Even though (counter)publics are social entities, given that social life is inherently spatial (Soja, 2010: 5-6), their sociality can be elucidated further when their spatiality is theoretically centered. It is the socio-spatial dialectic (Soja, 2010) and "struggle over geography" (Said, 1993) that primarily interest me. Moreover, because "space and spatial relations yield insights into unacknowledged biases, prejudices and inequalities that frequently go unexamined" (Low, 2014: 34), my approach allows me to

contextualize the emergence of safe spaces alongside notions of (in)justice, something missing from the mainstream safe space discourse despite featuring nearly ubiquitously in safe space policies.

Additionally, my approach helps to expand the conceptual boundaries of counterpublic theorization, which often lacks explicit engagement with spatial frameworks and analyses despite frequent references to so-called "space." As such, I am primarily interested in how feelings of public membership relate to spatial-situatedness. In other words, how do feelings of inclusion and belonging to a (counter)public relate to geographical sites and locales, and what happens to those feelings of belonging when geographies change? As Low writes, "Emotion and affect similarly play central roles in transforming space and place through preconscious, unconscious and conscious processes that color and influence behavior and practices and transmit and circulate feeling" (Low, 2014: 8). Where I theoretically engage the idea of (counter)public-making in this chapter, I turn to the role of neoliberal discourse on risk and safety in transforming the city's landscape. Discourse matters because "how space is categorized and represented linguistically further expands spatializing culture by examining how talk and media are deployed to transform spaces and spatial practices" (Low, 2014: 8). The way people talk about space can not only shape people's perceptions of it but also has the potential to influence policy and materially change it, too.

To aid in my analysis, I draw upon historical records as well as the experiences of one of my research participants, Chrissy. Chrissy was one of the few volunteers at Pocketbooks who grew up in New York City and witnessed firsthand the changes in Pocketbooks' surrounding neighborhoods. Her story is representative of a common

narrative; it is not an outlier experience upon which an entire argument is built. Nevertheless, focusing on Chrissy's personal story brings the narrative of the chapter to life. That Chrissy is one of the few Pocketbooks volunteers who grew up in this neighborhood and observed these changes is a point to which I return in the following chapter, but even those volunteers who did not grow up in the city cited this history as key to Pocketbooks' significance.

(1) Belonging to a queer counterpublic: reminiscing the city that once was a "safe space"

(1.1) Chrissy's story: homophobic violence and ontological insecurity in New York City

Although Chrissy once referred to the Village as her "safe space," like so many other LGBTQ+ people, her trajectory towards safety begins with violence. According to Chrissy, her teenage years—spent on "conservative, working-class Long Island"—were formative in her understanding of what it means to be a gay woman in a heterosexual society.

In her early adolescence, Chrissy's family decided to move from Queens to Long Island, which she described a "homophobic, dangerous place." On Long Island, her gender and sexual non-conformity not only marked her as "different" from her peers but also as a viable target of verbal harassment and physical assault. She confided in me that she was regularly beaten up by people in her neighborhood, where being gay, and additionally, a gay *woman*, was simply not accepted. Even though she was not expressing lesbian desire in any explicit way (such as holding hands with another woman or showing any kind of physical affection), her mere presence was enough to threaten the "sanctity" of heterosexuality. As a

result, something as basic as walking down the streets in her own neighborhood was a risky decision and left her vulnerable to assault.

Although one might expect that Chrissy spent her days dreaming of an end to this brutality, she told me that her routine exposure to physical and verbal abuse had almost the opposite effect. As it unfolded in our conversation, Chrissy not only expected violence, but she had also come to *accept* it, too. She told me that because of the frequency of her encounters with violence, she began to believe, on some level, that there was something fundamentally wrong with her and that her sexuality warranted punishment. She had even internalized the homophobic notion that wanting a better life was not only inconceivable, but greedy. She told me:

> I remember having run through my head, and this is no exaggeration, 'it's really spoiled of you to want to grow up in a place where you don't expect violence. That's just asking too much.' Yeah…" she trailed off.[12]

Unsurprisingly, Chrissy's frequent encounters with homophobic violence negatively impacted her emotional and mental wellbeing. She told me, "I felt completely alone and isolated." Being a lesbian in a place where sexual "deviants" were targets of violence, her ontological security— "a sense of confidence and trust in the world, a security of being" (Lewis et al., 2015: 3)—was jeopardized. She shared with me that she spent much of her time afraid and/or preparing for the next potential attack; to say that she had a marred sense of confidence in the world would be an understatement. The only thing she felt confident in was that violence was inevitable, and if she was not prepared, she might suffer an even

[12] Chrissy's experiences of being victim to homophobic violence resonate with the literature that illustrate how "space and place are heterosexualized" (Corteen, 2002: 260), that this heteronormativity poses a threat to sexual "dissidents" (e.g. LGBTQ people) (Adler and Brenner, 1992; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Namaste, 1996; Valentine, 1993), and that queer women face even more homophobic violence than men (*HRC*, 2018).

worse fate than a few injuries.

These feelings of isolation, she added, prevented her from carrying out normal, everyday tasks that other teenagers could without second thought. She said, "You can be in a 'good school system' but if you're worried about your life every day, you're not going to be thinking about math class. It's just not going to happen. So that was my day-to-day, every day." Like for many other LGBTQ+ people, "fear of homophobic violence act[ed] as a form of governance" (Corteen, 2002: 273), and Chrissy was no exception. Her fear of being subject to abuse and violence prevented her from living freely, from carrying out a life she might have otherwise wanted for herself[13]; it prevented Chrissy from having what Lewis et. al describe as a "safety *to*" (Lewis et al., 2015). To deal with this near-constant state of fear, Chrissy's initial strategy was to learn martial arts. As she described it, these defense strategies were "beaten into me."

Although Chrissy did learn to defend herself quite successfully, a life constantly on the defensive is still not a free one. Fortunately, Chrissy's luck would soon change. She started attending preparatory school for music in Manhattan on weekends, and a student mentioned offhand that "there were a bunch of gay people downtown." Determined to find other people like her, Chrissy told herself, "'Okay, the gay and lesbian center is there, I may as well wander in it.'"

[13] As Corteen (2002) suggests, the impacts of ontological insecurity are often undermined; research often prioritizes evaluating actualized physical threats without considering how fear of violence is enough to regulate people's behavior, movements, and language. However, "[t]he focus on physical violence, not only fails to recognize such harms it potentially serves to heighten or sensitize existent fears, whilst simultaneously playing down, undermining and negating the importance of ontological security and the impact of ontological insecurity" (Corteen: 276). Corteen's observation rings true with Chrissy's own experiences, seeing as fear could even prevent her from even completing her homework.

(1.2) "IT WAS JUST KIND OF OUR OWN LITTLE WORLD": DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN AS A QUEER (AND SUBALTERN) COUNTERPUBLIC

Chrissy recalls her years spent in the West Village with an incredible fondness. As I unpack in this section, the Village—and much of Downtown Manhattan—operated as a "queer counterpublic," a kind of public that "offer[s] an alternative to heteronormativity and an altered discourse of acceptable sexual standards" (Steele, 2013: 132), or as Warner writes, "addresses any participant as queer" (2002a: 120). As the examples in this section demonstrate, Downtown Manhattan was a place where LGBTQ+ people could find belonging and community, articulate their own needs, and set "gay" cultural practices.

The Village was the place Chrissy told me that finally felt like she *belonged*. And she belonged, she told me, because the West Village was "very, very gay." When I pressed Chrissy about what it meant for a neighborhood to be "very, very gay," she told me that it felt like queer sexuality was inscribed into the social and architectural landscape. In contrast to Long Island, where Chrissy's sexuality marked her as an outsider (not only visibly to others, but also internalized by Chrissy herself), at the LGBTQ Center, Chrissy said, "I had a counselor there for a while and that was really helpful. I saw that I was okay. I saw that there was more than one of just me." Recalling her first visit there, Chrissy said, "I felt at home." In another example, Chrissy said:

> I could leave the East and West Village, and there was always five minutes of culture shock, like what's wrong with these people holding hands with the opposite gender? And they don't have tattoos!? Oh, right, I'm not in the Village anymore. Just changing gears.

Although something like same-sex hand holding would be seen as an act of

transgression on Long Island, in the Village, public expressions of queer desire were normalized to the point where Chrissy experienced reverse culture shock when leaving. It was a place where the presumption of heterosexuality was dropped and where queer people were not only allowed to be themselves, but where queer visibility enabled other LGBTQ+ people to feel some sense of ontological security, too.

Besides visible queer bodies and expressions of desire, there were also architectural and linguistic cues that signaled the Village was home to a different kind of public than elsewhere, and that the needs of gay people like Chrissy were acknowledged and prioritized. Chrissy said that even businesses took part in creating what she called "a community of care," a phenomenon unlike anything she had experienced. While businesses in other neighborhoods were primarily interested in her for her ability to consume and spend, retail spaces and restaurants were much more personal in the Village; they existed not only to gain something (e.g., profit) but also to provide something (primarily, a sense of community and solidarity). For example, Chrissy recalled a restaurant that had a specials board outside the shopfront, but instead of listing the menu, as one might expect, "it would talk about things like, 'Have you taken your anti-depressants today?'— or all sorts of nutty little things." This shared sense of community, and even shared sense of mental health struggles, was inscribed into the local architecture. Something as seemingly unremarkable as a sandwich board held discursive power to influence Chrissy's sense of belonging. It felt "like family," she said, to know that she was not alone in whatever she was feeling.

Somewhat paradoxically, exclusion, or at least the exclusion of straight men, was crucial to Chrissy's sense of *in*clusion, since men were the main perpetrators in her experiences of homophobic (and misogynist) violence. In more conversations than one,

Chrissy told me how draining she finds it to be around straight men, and how lesbian or women-only communities enable her to facilitate more meaningful relationships and express herself without censorship. While the prevalence of straight men in in her hometown regularly invoked a sense of fear in Chrissy, in the West Village, she experienced some reprieve from their presence. Chrissy said, "I didn't have to interact with straight men on a very regular basis at all. That was a really, really nice thing." This point echoes Sarachild's (1978) argument about the need for women's-only spaces to speak freely and articulate needs without interruption or interference.

The history of the West Village, which is steeped in LGBTQ+ activism, only reaffirmed Chrissy's perception of her "gay neighborhood" and sense of belonging. As Chrissy articulated, "This is our spot, and there is history to that." For example, before New York abolished anti-sodomy laws in 1980 (see: *New York v. Onofre*, 1980), the West Village provided places of community to those who not only felt like outsiders but were criminalized for sexual non-conformity. When anti-sodomy laws were still in effect and when "masquerading" as the opposite sex (in essence, either being transgender or engaging in drag), the Stonewall Inn, like other gay bars, provided refuge for LGBTQ+ communities, when being publicly queer was not only socially unacceptable but punishable by law. On June 28, 1969, when police raided the Stonewall Inn, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, two trans women of color, sparked a riot that would eventually lead to a more organized LGBTQ+ movement and Pride (Jackman et al., 2018). These events were known as the era-defining Stonewall Riots, which marked a turning point in LGBTQ+ activism.

The Christopher Street piers on the Hudson River also acted as a haven for queer youth of color and the drag community (Hanhardt, 2013; Manalansan, 2005). St. Vincent's

Hospital (now closed), the third oldest hospital in the city, became known as "Ground Zero" during the AIDS epidemic and was one of the first hospitals to respond to and treat HIV and AIDS (Morowitz, 2017). The New York City AIDS Memorial is located across the street from this "Ground Zero" (Morowitz, 2017). And as Chrissy told me, the LGBT Community Center was founded in 1983, which acts as a resource hub. Needless to say, the West Village is known for its history of gay activism; there is even a street named "Gay Street." It is therefore unsurprising that the West Village felt like "our little world," as Chrissy said. It provided refuge when queer gender and sexual expression was illegal, it gave space to defining and creating LGBTQ+ culture, and it prioritized the health and wellbeing of a community that was otherwise seen as threatening to the dominant social order.

Although the Village is known primarily for acting as a haven for the LGBTQ+ community, it should be said that Downtown Manhattan acted as a refuge for many kinds of people who were systemically oppressed and at the margins of society and was also a lively site for activism and protest. The East Village and Lower East Side were home to squatters, radical activists, immigrants, artists, hippies, and LGBTQ+ people; moreover, many of these residents engaged in explicitly radical, leftist politics. As Chrissy put it, "The East Village was just everyone freaky."

Additionally, for over a century, the Lower East Side "received into its tenements and railroad apartments wave after wave of immigrants from Europe, the Caribbean and most recently East Asia and –again—eastern Europe" (Smith and Defilippis, 1999: 640), including Jewish immigrants fleeing European anti-Semitism. Some people even argue that the "Jewish Lower East Side" is synonymous with the neighborhood in the way that Italians are associated with Little Italy (Martinez, 2010: 11). On the Lower East Side—or

"Loisaida"—Puerto Ricans also formed an enclave of their own, which played a vital role in the formation of its well-known community gardens (Martinez, 2010).

Access to public space was key to these communities forging their own ways of life. Although there are many urban landmarks that represent these communities (like Stonewall Inn, for example), Tompkins Square Park remains one of the most well-known and iconic of them all. It is where immigrants in the 19th Century rallied for improved labor conditions, and it is also where many decades later, in the 1950s, hippie culture, youth, and music flourished. In the 1980s, it hosted punk music and drag shows, but also acted "as a haven for the homeless," and in doing so, "embod[ied] the spirit of the East Village" (Bowery Boys, 2014). Tompkins Square Park regularly came up in conversations at Pocketbooks by volunteers who reminisced about "how it used to be," including Chrissy, who recalled the park in the 1990's as being a place where she and her girlfriend could "get off" without anyone batting an eyelash.

Mostly, Downtown Manhattan was a place for those without place elsewhere. As Chrissy said:

> Everybody had their quirks and everybody was happy about having their quirks. And it was just a very honest place and people could just be who they were, and that was the main thing. Whoever you were, it was fine.

It was, as Chrissy told me, her "safe space." But as I soon came to learn, despite the "safe" descriptor, the neighborhood was not risk or violence free.

(1.3) ON BELONGING AND RISK

As I shared at the outset of this thesis, most conceptualizations of safe spaces suggest that safety entails the elimination—or at least reduction—of risk. Rather naively, I assumed that when Chrissy said that the Village was her "safe space," she meant that was less likely to experience violence, too. When I initiated a conversation with Chrissy about her experiences of violence and harassment in Downtown Manhattan, however, she responded with an unexpected answer. In what seemed like a U-turn from her comment that the Village had been her "safe space," Chrissy said, "I wouldn't say it was *safer*. It wasn't necessarily safer." She explained that the visibility of gay people in the Village introduced new risks and dangers, because the area was known to *everyone*, not just those who were hoping to find like-minded people. She elaborated:

> It wasn't safer than other parts of New York, and you had a good chance of being gay bashed. Because if people were looking to gay bash, they would come to the Village, looking to give someone a problem.

In other words, the neighborhood's visibility acted as a double-edged sword: it enabled people like Chrissy to find community and experience a sense of belonging, but it also attracted those with a vendetta against the LGBTQ+ community and/or people with a desire to enact harm. She added that there was no guarantee that anyone would be around to help in case of an attack, either. Chrissy said, "You don't know who's gonna be around, you don't know who's gonna be able to help."

Nevertheless, even though homophobic violence was still prevalent in the Village—maybe even more likely to happen, according to Chrissy—she still thought of it as her "safe space." Being the insider, the one who *belonged*, she told me, gave her a sense of safety (or

even a sense of ontological security). This ontological security, however, was not a confidence that homophobic violence was unlikely, but rather a confidence that a perpetrator of that violence would be classified as such: the person in the wrong. While on Long Island, for instance, Chrissy knew that the local community would ultimately see *her* as the transgressor because of her sexual "deviancy," in the Village, the local community would share a sense of injustice *with* her. Chrissy said:

> You know it's *your* space, and there's a problem if somebody is giving *you* a problem. It may be 'okay' somewhere else; here, *they're* the one with the problem."

Even if norms in Downtown Manhattan were breached and homophobic violence still happened, Chrissy reiterated, "If somebody had a problem," such as harassing a homeless or LGBTQ+ person, "*they* were the one with the problem. And *that* was the main difference." In other words, the mere recognition of homophobic violence as a form of violence engendered feelings of safety, rather than the absence of violence itself. Borrowing language from Hudson (2003), we might say that in Downtown Manhattan, the LGBTQ+ community—along with other marginalized groups like immigrants and unhoused people—were classified as risk bearers, and heterosexual people were considered potential risk posers. In other words, it was not the amount of risk that determined whether Chrissy felt safe but rather the community's *orientation to* risk. *Who* was deemed the risk poser (perpetrator) and *who* was deemed the risk bearer (victim/survivor) was essential to affording her a sense of confidence in herself and feelings of (shared) ownership over the space through which she was moving. As Chrissy emphasized, "It was *our* neighborhood. And it was *our* world."

According to Chrissy's description, Downtown Manhattan operated as a "paradoxical space," where "center, margin, and outside—are occupied simultaneously" (Rose, 1993: 143; see also: Valentine and Skelton, 2003; The Roestone Collective, 2014). Like other counterpublics and queer spaces, the area introduced new risks to LGBTQ+ people while also affording them new opportunities. For example, as the infamous Stonewall Riots demonstrate, police raids of gay bars and arrests were not uncommon in the West Village; although people might have experienced freedom to express queer desire and belonging, doing so came with legal risks. Moreover, the AIDS epidemic (see Jonsen, 1993) demonstrates the double-edged sword of the safety the gay community found in the 1980s; sexual freedom came with physical dangers and even the possibility of death. Others have illustrated that the gay scene may increase exposure to new dangers like abusive relationships, drugs, and alcohol, while also being sexually liberating; it can act "as both sources of support and of risk" (Valentine and Skelton, 2003: 863). Feelings of safety, then, were not forged in the absence of risk but alongside the emergence of new potential threats.

That Downtown Manhattan may have presented more (and new) risks to the LBGTQ+ community (and others), does not mean that it somehow "failed" in being a counterpublic, or that it did not successfully "counter" the dominant publics it sought to contest. Instead, this paradoxical nature reiterates the point that counterpublics are still embedded within and stand in relation to dominant publics; even though a place like Downtown Manhattan prioritized the needs, desires, and membership of marginalized groups, structures of homophobia, patriarchy, racism, classism, and more inevitably would inevitably penetrate its porous boundaries. Counterpublics are not places *away* from dominant publics, and Downtown Manhattan is no exception. And as the communities in

Downtown Manhattan would soon learn, it could not fence out the urban development that was heading its way.

(2) A DISCOURSE ON SAFETY, GENTRIFICATION, AND THE EROSION OF SAFE SPACE

(2.1) (UN)SAFE OR UNSAVORY?: THE DISCOURSE OF GENTRIFICATION AND SOCIO-SPATIAL EXCLUSIONS IN DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN

Although Downtown Manhattan was a safe space for Chrissy, others saw it as a place in need of refurbishment and renewal. One of these people was none other than the mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, whose new policies would shape the city for decades to come and forever change the neighborhoods that Chrissy had come to know and love.

In fairness to Giuliani, in 1991, the city reported its highest crime rates on record (Vitale, 2008: 1), which prompted him to develop a plan of action to get these rates under control. Hoping to decrease crime, "[restore] social order and public civility," and ultimately, make the city safer, he implemented what became known as "quality of life" laws, aimed at targeting low level crime (Vitale, 2008: 1). Based on the "Broken Windows" criminological philosophy (see Wilson and Kelling, 1982) which regards low-level crimes as the stepping-stone to urban disorder and incivility—because low-level misbehavior purportedly begets greater misbehavior—Giuliani enacted new laws, policing efforts, and urban development to restore public order. Under Giuliani's new campaign, behaviors like prostitution and drug use, for example, would be considered "quality of life" offenses; this is because, according to this philosophy, a society which does not criminalize these behaviors will see more serious law breaking (Sahm, 2007). These policies were enforced with no-

tolerance policing and targeting public spaces, which were seen as facilitating incivilities that lead to more serious criminal behaviors.

One public space that Giuliani targeted was none other than the cultural landmark, Tompkins Square Park, which has been described as a symbol of "neighborhood autonomy" (Martinez, 2010: 22). While Chrissy experienced the park as a place where she could freely express and engage in her sexuality, this behavior was precisely the type of "incivility" targeted by Giuliani's "quality of life" policies. In 1988, a riot even broke out after a business owner complained "that the Park's squatters—stereotypically portrayed as body-pierced, dissolute white youth—undermined the tourist appeal and quality life of the city" (Martinez, 2010: 16). Tompkins Square Park—which was seen as responsible for facilitating these "incivilities" by virtue of the kinds of people who inhabited it—was taken into the city's hands for refurbishment.

At the crack of dawn on Monday, June 3, 1991, a group of over 300 policemen from the New York City Police Department (NYPD), including some in riot gear, surrounded the perimeters of the park. Backed by command trucks, stationed at the four corners of the park, the NYPD forcibly removed 150 people residing there, otherwise known as "squatters." The takeover of the park was forcible. Helicopters flew overhead, protesters threw gasoline at officers, and some 25 people were arrested (Holloway, 1996). Despite mass protests, the park was (re)claimed by the city. When it reopened, the bandshell which "had been a center for neighborhood protests was destroyed, leaving no permanent structures designed for public performances or demonstrations" (Martinez, 2010: 22). Police presence was increased, with a "tank-like vehicle" parked nearby (Martinez, 2010: 22). While these changes were devastating to people like Chrissy, they were praised by many prominent

figures and media outlets, including the *New York Times*, which called this renovated Tompkins Square Park "a "shining emerald" (Bennet, 1992).

But for whom was the park a "shining emerald"; for whom had it been made safe? One protestor, a resident of the neighborhood and father of a teenage boy, said, "I'm protesting because Giuliani is making this neighborhood safe for $1,400-a-month apartments" (Holloway, 1996). Another protestor said, "When I first came here I could get an apartment for $110 a month…Now, for the first time in the Lower East Side's history, the poor can't afford to live here" (Holloway, 1996). Several protestors carried placards saying, "Save the squatters," and protestors criticized the city for failing to create housing for people with AIDS, as it had promised (Holloway, 1996). As these protestors pointed out, Giuliani, backed by the police force, was making the city safe for more affluent residents by forcibly removing and excluding those with less privilege (in this case, often unhoused people who may have also had serious health conditions).

The takeover of Tompkins Square Park is only one example of the ways in which public space was privatized under Giuliani's reign; many other places that were once home to more marginalized communities were cleared to make room for more prosperous ones. In the mid-1990s, Downtown Manhattan experienced an explosion in real estate reinvestment, which continued the process of displacing local populations. While there was some "[s]poradic construction of some public housing units at the tail end of the city's ten-year housing plan," these efforts were totally eclipsed by "private venture markets" (Smith and Defilippis, 1999: 647). Orchard Street, a street that had previously been known for its affordable clothes bazaar—operated by Jewish entrepreneurs and more recently by East Asian immigrants—saw an explosion of new trendy shops and cafés. In 1996, eight

buildings were renovated, 127 new apartments were created, and shops were sold to "fashion retailers with links, variously, to the Paris fashion market" (Smith and Defilippis, 1999: 647-648). By the summer of 1997, 1,000 housing units were in progress in the Lower East Side (Smith and Defilippis, 1999: 647). This process of gentrification, of both spatially and socially altering the urban landscape to prioritize groups worthy of the city's provisions, has persisted into the 2000s and 2010s, too. As one article in the *New York Times* states, "While the printers and specialty lingerie shops kept a foothold, the stylized boutique selling $200 jeans and the skin-care spa with the cult following had quietly moved in" (Wright, 2011).

Community gardens on the Lower East Side, which were often home to squatters and challenged conventional ideas of property ownership, were also subject to the "commodification overtaking the Lower East Side" (Smith and Defilippis, 1999: 649). Although the city tolerated the public gardens in the early 1990s, primarily because they "generated bulwark against the homeless encampments that had sprouted on many vacant lots," its attitude changed when there was more private investment in the area (Smith and Defilippis, 1999: 649). Initially, a few of the gardens were turned into public housing, but in the mid-1990s, the city seized many of these gardens for real estate developers and private housing. Five gardens were even sold to developers at a public auction in March 1998; in another case, "a Hollywood production studio paid the City to use one community garden as a film set" (Smith and Defilippis, 1999: 649). After filming, the gardeners were no longer permitted to return to their garden, and the land was turned over to private development (Smith and Defilippis, 1999: 649).

On the surface, one might consider Giuliani's campaign a success. By 2000, the city's crime rates were the lowest they had ever been, and homelessness was nearly invisible to the public eye (Vitale, 2008: 1). Murder rates decreased significantly, as well. When Giuliani took office in 1994, 2,801 murders were committed, but by 2003, there were only 537, the lowest number of murders the city had recorded since 1963 (Adams, 2006).

Giuliani's praises have been sung in the press for decades, too, and his policies are generally viewed as a success; in the plainest terms, the city is now seen as safe because of the polices Giuliani implemented, and he is depicted as a hero who rescued a city in decline. Consider the first sentence in an article, entitled "How New York Became Safe": "Just 20 years ago, New York City was racked with crime: murders: burglaries, drug deals, car thefts, theft *from* cars…" (Kelling, 2009). Lauding Giuliani, Kelling writes, "Clearly, Giuliani and Bratton were heroes in reclaiming public spaces" (2009). Consider the language from a travel guide: "The East Village and Lower East Side were once filthy, overpopulated areas, but now they are among New York City's best loved neighborhoods. Foodies and adventurers come here to explore the back alleys, hoping to find a top-notch underground restaurant or speakeasy with amazing music" (Steinebach, n.d.). As Martinez (2010) writes, even though these neighborhoods were once neglected by the city and considered undesirable, they are now places where young "wealthy young people" can "pay for the convenience and cachet of living in a 'funky' refurbished neighborhood" (2010: 9).

Despite what this public discourse implies, the city had become more dangerous for those with less systemic power. For example, although homelessness was less visible to the public eye (after all, unhoused people were either jailed or forcibly removed from public sites), by 2004, homelessness was at its highest level since the Great Depression (Vitale,

2008: 1). Moreover, tens of thousands of New Yorkers were incarcerated due to no-tolerance policing, often for minor offenses like public drinking, urinating in public, or sleeping in public parks (Vitale, 2008: 1). As Vitale (2008) writes, the result of the quality of life paradigm "has been the broad criminalization of homeless and other socially marginal people and the abandonment of the liberal ideas of reducing economic and social inequality which guaranteed basic universal human rights, and promoted tolerance" (2008: 3). This is because the neoliberal paradigm sees homelessness, unemployment, and crime "as one of individualized moral failure leading to neighborhood disorder and decline," rather than acknowledging the structural failures and solutions to these problems (Vitale, 2008: 3).

The city's efforts, then, have been taken away from "improving the lives of the disenfranchised and towards restoring social order in the city's public spaces" (Vitale, 2008: 1). In reference to Soja (2010), we might call consider gentrification a manifestation of spatial injustice—a process achieved, ironically, through a discourse safety (or language that invoke notions of it), despite putting the most vulnerable people at greater risk of harm, like unemployment, homelessness, or incarceration. Smith (1996) has referred to this loss of local significance through gentrification as "taming"—taming of "the poor and working class [who] are all too easily defined as 'uncivil'" (1996: 16).

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to suggest that Giuliani and the law enforcement were the main actors in implementing this new quality of life paradigm. Other local communities—indeed, communities that one might expect to resist this kind of paradigm—have shared overlapping interests with urban developers and have also taken part in the spatializing of injustice, of (re)claiming public space at the expense of other, more vulnerable, communities.

(2.2) HOMONORMATIVITY AND THE CHRISTOPHER STREET PIERS: QUEER ACTIVISM COLLABORATES WITH URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Despite ostensibly sharing in a marginalized identity, not all members within the LGBTQ+ community are oriented towards "risk" and "safety" in the same way. Even within the queer community, there are differences in lived experiences, based on factors like race, socioeconomic status, gender, and other axes of power. Not only does this mean that the LGBTQ+ community is heterogenous and therefore not all queer people are subject to the same kinds of violence (e.g., a Black lesbian may be subject to violence at the intersection(s) of race, gender, and sexuality, whereas a white gay man may primarily experience discrimination based on sexuality alone), but it also means that more privileged members within the LGBTQ+ community can oppress more marginalized members within that same community. As I share in this section, mainstream queer activism has acted alongside urban development and has contributed to the unequal spatial reordering of the city. Moreover, it has often done so through the language of "safety" and "antiviolence"; as with Giuliani's "quality of life" paradigm, some queer activists have drawn boundaries around more and less "savory" groups within the LGBTQ+ community.

In her seminal book, *Safe space: gay neighborhood and the politics of violence*, Hanhardt (2013) argues that LGBTQ-antiviolence organizing has been central to the LGBTQ community since the 1970s. The category of what constitutes LGBTQ-antiviolence, however, has shifted drastically over the decades, "from the social to the criminological" (Hanhardt, 2013: 9). In practice, this has meant that the 1970s anti-assimilation gay activism, which prioritized coalition-building across racial and class divisions, has been abandoned as a more upper-middle class, white form of LGBTQ concept of "antiviolence"

has taken precedence. Duggan (2002) refers to this newer type of LGBTQ politics as "homonormativity," defined as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (2002: 179). This type of gay activism has prioritized issues like legalizing gay marriage (Manalansan, 2005: 142), for instance, rather than abolishing marriage altogether; it has urged for an assimilation into heterosexual norms and rights to privacy. As Warner writes, "It is no accident that the organizations promoting marriage are defined primarily as advocates for lesbian and gay identity rather than for nonnormative sexual cultures" (Warner, 1999: 96).

Crucially, "this shift [has been] grounded in privatized claims to the neighborhood" (Hanhardt, 2013: 9). As Hanhardt (2013) demonstrates, this newer politics advocates for safety in terms of "quality of life," where quality of life refers to the architecture and bodies deemed safe by the most privileged people in the LGBTQ+ community. The most vulnerable populations within the community—usually queer people of color, many of them youth—are categorized as threats or risks, bodies that need "cleaning up" and "clearing out" to improve the quality of life for the white, middle-to-upper-class, gay, predominately male population. In other words, this process of "taming" (Smith, 1996) has also occurred *within* disenfranchised communities. This phenomenon has been especially visible in New York and San Francisco, including Downtown Manhattan.

The Christopher Street piers in the West Village are a prime example of how homonormativity has enabled more affluent, white queer people to assimilate into the city while fortressing themselves from less privileged members of the community (if it can even

be called one, given its fractures). Back in the 1970s and 1980s, the piers were a queer landmark for "cruising and socializing," especially for queer people of color and queer youth (Manalansan, 2005: 149). For example, the piers often served as a practice runway for Latin and African American queer youth, who prepared for their runway shows and vogueing[14] moves (Manalansan, 2005: 149). The drag documentary *Paris is Burning* (1991), filmed in the mid-to-late 80s, portrays the Christopher Street piers as a socially significant location for drag communities and queer people of color. The piers often attracted gay and at-risk youth who may have been ostracized from their families, or homeless, or from unsafe homes, and at excessive risk of violence. Many of the drag and queer community joined drag houses and constructed their own "families" who would congregate in this area; as the terms "drag mother" and "daughter" suggest, the community they found was akin to family, and the piers were their home.

Today, however, the piers no longer exist. Instead, they have been replaced by high-rise condominiums and apartments along the waterfront and the highway, and a manicured park invites families to picnic. Where warehouses once marked the area, nowadays, paved paths for cyclists, skaters, and joggers weave throughout the piers, welcoming an entirely different crowd to this area. As one gay Latino informant told Manalansan (2005), it is evident that "this was not built for them" (2005: 149). He shared, "'We don't come here to

[14] Vogueing is a stylized dance that originated in the 1980s among a predominately Black, Latinx, gay, subcultural community and can be traced to the Harlem ballroom scene. Between the 1960s and 1980s, pageantry-style balls were held where queer and trans contestants could compete in drag by walking the runway or entering vogueing battles. The ballroom scene has even been described as a "safe space" because contestants would belong to and compete for a "house," which often acted as a surrogate family for marginalized people who were often abandoned by their biological families (Schijen, 2019). Vogueing has been described as a "tool for ballgoers to tell their stories, including a way of responding to the Aids crisis"(Schijen, 2019). The ballroom scene allowed for contestants to satirize and subvert white femininity while also allowing for them to experience stardom, glory, and community, too (Schijen, 2019).

rollerblade or jog. We come here to practice our [vogueing] moves. But we are told [by the police] not to play any loud music or to carry on. How can you have a bunch of queens and not carry on?'" (Manalansan, 2005: 149). While the shiny new pavement and new-fangled buildings may feel more welcoming and inviting to the yuppie, white middle class, they alienate the population that once congregated there.

Moreover, there is a notably increased police presence, which exists primarily to police queer bodies of color. This is especially visible between 2 a.m. and 5 a.m., when bars close; police try to prevent the area from becoming "rowdy"—meaning, bearing resemblance to the piers of the seventies and eighties where gay cruising was commonplace (Manalansan, 2005: 150). On the role of policing in "taming" neighborhoods, Martinez writes:

> In assuming that the police and other authorities are there for them, gentrifiers are not wrong. Taming is not just a cultural process: it has been an express object of much recent policing on…to make [neighborhoods] more amenable to gentrifiers by removing and containing the ethnic and countercultural component of life. (Martinez, 2010: 22)

This policing and hostility towards queer people of color is not isolated to law enforcement, though. One Black person interviewed by Manalansan reported that a building guard told him and his friends that they were "scaring" unit owners by standing in front of one of these new condominiums—ironically called "The Pier"—with his friends (Manalansan, 2005: 150-151). As with gated communities, residents of The Pier expressed fearfulness, despite their safety not being jeopardized. While many queer people of color still attempt to maintain some presence there, it is clear that there has been a "literal and metaphoric 'cleaning up' of the piers and the surrounding streets from vagrants, 'gangs,' and other 'unwanted' groups"; as a result, "they have lost something that cannot be replaced: a

sense of ownership of the area" (Manalansan, 2005: 150). And as I previously argued, a sense of ownership was what provided these communities with a sense of ontological security, of feeling safe.

But this taking over of the Christopher Street Piers was not done by Giuliani, the police force, or building guards on their own. More privileged members of the LGBTQ+ community—most often gay, white, men—sought privacy and distance from those with who were deemed as a "threat" to their way of living and/or to their ability to assimilate more easily into heterosexual publics.

On 6 May, 2002, an anticrime rally, "Take Back Our Streets" took place in Christopher Park, alongside the Christopher Street piers, led by local residents, politicians, and business owners (Hanhardt, 2013: 1). Ironically located at Stonewall, the "Take Back Our Streets" rally of 2002 was not about reclaiming space for the most marginalized communities or protesting police presence; the phrase was co-opted for another purpose. The rally was linked to Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's "enforcement of quality-of-life laws, which target low-level offenses such as noise and loitering" (Hanhardt, 2013: 1-2). A notice placed on a community board in downtown Manhattan, entitled, "Notice of Public Hearing: Take Back Our Streets," says, "Summer's coming! Fight Back against our new neighbors; the Bloods and the Crips plus our old neighbors, the dealers, the hookers, the pimps, the johns" (see Figure Intro.1 in: Hanhardt, 2013: 2). The primary occupants—the "old neighbors" referred to in this notice—were queer people of color; however, the campaign was led primarily by white people (Hanhardt, 2013: 2). And unlike the original Stonewall protestors who viewed policing as violent—something to seek safety from, not in collaboration with—those at the rally saw police as a viable institution with which to partner

for protection.

Even though queer people were the primary targets of this campaign, many of the most prominent LGBTQ+ organizations remained silent. As Hanhardt (2013) writes, "No major LGBT groups came out on behalf of those targeted," and further, "many white, middle-class lesbian and gay residents remained silent or absent during community meetings" (2013: 4). Additionally, many of those residents actively supported organizations like Residents in Distress (RID) and the Christopher Street Patrol—voluntary anticrime groups, or neighborhood watch groups. Moreover, because many of those who were involved in the rally and campaign were gay—or at least seen as representing the gay neighborhood—it was assumed that "Take Back Our Streets" could not possibly be anti-LGBTQ+ (Hanhardt, 2013: 6-7). The language used in the campaign mirrored a lot of what Stonewall activists once used, like the right to safety and freedom from risk. If anything, the campaign was predominately promoted—and perceived by many—as protecting the gay neighborhood from danger *as a form of LGBTQ activism*, despite it having a radically different agenda from the original Stonewall organizations. And while some members of the LGBTQ+ community (mostly gay, white men) may have benefited from this kind of activism, their freedom came at the cost of the "hordes of lives and bodies fenced out of these extremely private and privatized domains" (Manalansan, 2005: 151).

What constitutes LGBTQ+ antiviolence activism had shifted considerably between Stonewall and the "cleaning up" of the Christopher Street piers as community divisions became more relevant and visible. Hanhardt (2013) explores several reasons for this shift, but two explanations are especially poignant. To begin, Stonewall was a different era. Anti-sodomy laws were still in place in many states in the 1960s, including New York; at the

time, all LGBTQ+ members were targeted based on their sexuality. This discrimination "crossed racial and class lines"; "laws against lewdness, vagrancy, solicitation, and cross-dressing were routinely used to target a wide range of sexual and gender nonnormative people" (Hanhardt, 2013: 5). Everyone in the LGBTQ+ community was "considered a criminal class," and because of this shared illegal status, there existed "an imagined solidarity between many of those arrested at Stonewall Inn" (Hanhardt, 2013: 5).

The fragility of this solidarity became more apparent in the following decades as homosexuality became disassociated from the category of "criminal" and anti-sodomy laws were dropped. However, similar laws against "lewdness, loitering, and solicitation continued to be used against LGBT people, but most often they were applied to those also targeted along other lines—significantly, race and class but also age, gender expression, and sexual subculture" (Hanhardt, 2013: 5). As homosexuality integrated more into mainstream culture (with the legalization of gay marriage and the proliferation of Pride parades, for example), the rift between the "white, middle-class, gender normative gay residents" and the rest of the LGBTQ community became more evident.

Another important factor in the shifting category of "threat" in LGBTQ+ antiviolence activism is neoliberal shift away from community approaches to combatting poverty. While the 1960s were more influenced by "structural rather than individual solutions" to poverty and low-income youth, by the 1990s, "ideologies based in the primacy of the free market have worked in neighborhoods with rising rents to further secure the use of liberal institutions like the community boards as mechanisms to protect property rights" (Hanhardt, 2013: 6). With this change, programs with the intention of serving LGBTQ+ youth were developed primarily in wealthier, whiter neighborhoods; LGBTQ+ youth who

were less privileged instead received "zero tolerance" youth policing (Hanhardt, 2013: 6), as exhibited on the Christopher Street piers. "The fact that this neighborhood was the ground zero for the new draconian policing strategies—for example, quality-of-life policing in the city…. must but understood as part of this broader cultural and economic geography" (Hanhardt, 2013: 6).

As I outlined in Chapter 1, the shifting of blame onto the individual and away from collective responsibilities has damaged those most vulnerable to systemic oppression and discrimination. Even though gentrification has been done in the name of "gay protection" (Hanhardt, 2013: 7), "the promotion and protection of gay neighborhoods have reinforced the race and class stratification of postwar urban space," (Hanhardt, 2013: 7). Therefore, the ways in which people classify safety, violence, and risk are not only influenced by their relationship(s) to structures of power, but they also have the potential to shape and reorder space, including whose bodies are allowed to move through it.

(2.3) From "risk bearer" to "risk poser": implications of gentrification for belonging, space, and safety in Downtown Manhattan

For about a year or so in her twenties, Chrissy found that she spent considerably less time in Downtown Manhattan than she had as a teenager. She had taken a break from volunteering at Pocketbooks and had been preoccupied with work elsewhere, so she frequented the neighborhood much less than she once had. When she returned to the shop, she could not believe how much the neighborhood had changed, and moreover, how out of

place she felt being there. Below, Chrissy recalls the first time she really noticed what had happened to her old stomping grounds:

> It was 2006 or 2007, I came to the bookstore, and I was going to an event with a friend, and I wasn't volunteering, so I hadn't been back to the neighborhood in a year or so. And the feel was just totally different. The people walking down the street were totally different, and it was like any other neighborhood. And I was like, 'Where the fuck is everybody? What the hell is going on? Where is my neighborhood?' And it fully dawned on me that things were changing, and that was something that we never imagined happening.

Interestingly, the first thing Chrissy noticed was not the architectural and urban environment, but the social and cultural changes that had occurred alongside the spatial transformation. And for good reason, too. Not only were bodies visibly different from her youth, but so were the cultural cues that went alongside these bodies—including the visibility of same-sex desires and gender expression. Chrissy said:

> Gentrification has changed the East Village so dramatically in the past few decades, it's almost unrecognizable. I was holding hands with my girlfriend the other day, walking through SoHo to the West Village, and it felt like an act of transgression.

The city's takeover of public space resulted in a decrease of the kinds of people that had previously occupied it, and along with it, the visibility of the people and expression of cultural norms they had cultivated for decades. The grief Chrissy felt can be summarized in two short sentences: "I miss my gay neighborhood. I miss my safe space." Chrissy not only mourned the loss of her queer counterpublic, but the safe space that was cultivated through forging their own culture, membership, and values. Holding hands with her girlfriend would now be an act of transgression or of defiance, not something she could do "without anyone batting an eyelash." Now, something as basic as showing same-sex affection was a threat to the dominant, heterosexual order—the kind of thing that had her beaten up as a teenager. It is no wonder that Chrissy felt like she had lost her safe space and the freedom to be herself

without fear. She was now more likely to be classified as a risk poser, not a risk bearer—as someone who did not belong to the public, rather than as a key member.

Despite feelings of loss, Chrissy also expressed sentiments of ownership and entitlement. Chrissy recalled a date that she had recently gone on with a woman at a restaurant in the Village where everyone "looked straight." She confessed to me, "What I wanted to say to them was, 'If you don't look queer and you're in the East Village, leave. Just go. We don't want you here anyway.'" In another recent event, Chrissy recalls passing her old turf by the LGBTQ center in the West Village:

> You know, I was walking… on 13th St and the [LGBTQ] center is a block [away]— you can see it—and this beautiful rich straight couple goes by holding hands, and a guy behind them is this very obviously adorable little twink of a gay man and we just look at each other and I said loud enough for the straight people to hear, 'I miss the old neighborhood, don't you?" I don't think it even registered to them.

The anger is salient to Chrissy's comment, as is the underlying confidence and defiance that accompany it. Compared to how Chrissy described her adolescence, a time when she believed she deserved violence and was characterized by loneliness, here she expresses feelings of entitlement to so much more—not only a life without violence, but a place where she can be herself to the fullest, celebrate her sexuality, and where her desires are normalized. She can be described as feeling a "right to the city" (c.f., Lefebvre, 1968, and more recently, Harvey, 2003), a right to shape the landscape she inhabits, not only be shaped by it. Additionally, she no longer sees *herself* as the problem but instead sees heterosexual norms as the issue that needs changing. The neighborhood is now unwelcomingly occupied by unwelcome residents, but she sees them as that: *occupiers* unjustly settling a territory that was not theirs to claim.

Although Chrissy's city has undeniably changed and her neighborhood may no longer be recognizable, so, too did her time there undoubtedly transform her sense of self, too. To echo Steele's (2013) argument about queer counterpublics, Downtown Manhattan enabled Chrissy to carry a sense of personhood into other publics, too, even if its counterpublic space was, in some ways, fleeting and susceptible to urban development. Moreover, her feelings of confidence in her own identity and worth, combined with her sense of attachment to a place that afforded her that confidence, left her with a sense of injustice. And with injustice comes a sense defiance, a desire to right what has been wronged, to reclaim what had been taken from her and others like her: a place she can feel at home, find community, and challenge dominant social norms.

CONCLUSION

Although New York City is so often portrayed as a city that has finally become safe, the story I share in this chapter is not what one might glean from major media headlines about the trajectory of safety in New York City. Rather than a story of a city going from rags to riches, the one I present is a story of loss—a loss not only of urban space for marginalized groups but of the possibilities that existed within it: the visibility of counterpublic cultural norms, a community of care and compassion, and a sense of "safe space" for those who feel unsafe (and are often on the receiving end of violence) in most other publics.

Homophobic violence—and violence towards any marginalized communities, for that matter—are not new. Nevertheless, the ways in which neoliberal politics and economics have manifested, particularly in urban areas, has introduced yet a new form of violence

towards those most vulnerable: the erosion of (counter)public space where they once experienced freedom, found community, and enacted alternatives to the dominant social order. But as Chrissy told me in her self-defense class, “Take up space. Reclaim it as yours.” Chrissy’s command was about more than encouraging me to stand taller. It was a call to action.

INTERLUDE 3



Figure 5: Left depicts a shelf end with a handwritten bell hooks quote, "Life transforming ideas have always come to me through books"; next to this is a photo of a t-shirt for sale with an anarchist "A" reading a book; below is a photo from the street of decal lettering on the front door, which reads, "We are a safer space"; the final photo on the right is the main counter area for purchasing coffee and baked goods, which has a community bulletin board below the countertop.

(1) Pocketbooks Mission Statement, 1999

> We are committed to providing the community with an in-depth, diverse, and varied collection of women-authored and women-related books, zines, periodicals, and other literature. Pocketbooks carries women's writing anywhere from major publishers to independent feminist presses to self-published works. The bookstore is also a community space open to readings, performances, art shows, benefits,

meetings, workshops, a community bulletin board, networking, and generally any needs the women's community has that Pocketbooks can fill. We hope to bridge the gaps, close the divisions, and open communication in the women's community of New York City by serving as a community center as well as a doorway to and support for women's writing.

(2) Pocketbooks Mission Statement, 2000

Pocketbooks, an independent women's bookstore and cafe of New York City's Lower East Side, promotes the empowerment of women through words, art and activism. We work to be an intersection of dialogue and information exchange, providing women-focused books, events, workshops, and a meeting and gathering place. Recognizing the links between oppressions, our goal is to be trans-inclusive, multi-lingual, open to all sexualities and spiritualities, intergenerational and to challenge racism, classism, ablism, sexism, ageism and sizism. We have adopted a collective structure, and we strive to be an organizing site in the struggle for social, economic, and environmental justice.

(3) Pocketbooks Mission Statement, 2002-2015

Pocketbooks is an independent bookstore, café, and activist resource center, located in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Through words, art, food, activism, education, and community, we strive to create a space that welcomes and empowers all people. We actively support movements that challenge hierarchy and all systems of oppression, including but not limited to patriarchy, heterosexism, the gender binary, white supremacy and classism, within society as well as our own movements. We seek to make our space and resources available to such movements for meetings, events, and research. Additionally, we offer educational programming that promotes centered, strategic, and visionary thinking, towards the realization of a society that is infinitely creative, truly democratic, equitable, ecological, and free.

(4) Pocketbooks Mission Statement, December 2015 – early 2021

Pocketbooks seeks to empower all people to challenge oppression and participate in creating a society which is equitable, cooperative, and free by:

- Distributing literature and resources about oppression, intersectionality, community organizing, and activism, and by sharing the stories of marginalized people
- Maintaining a space in New York City for dialogue, education, and reflection where all people are respected; and
- Building connections, knowledge, and skills in our communities

Pocketbooks seeks to embody and share the principles of intersectional trans-affirming feminisms and support liberatory social movements. Pocketbooks strives to empower our volunteer workers through non-hierarchy, cooperation, and collective-based decision making, providing an example of the society we are working toward.

(5) Pocketbooks Safer Space Policy, 2012 – early 2021

Pocketbooks safer space policy is intended to help Pocketbooks be a supportive, nonthreatening environment for all who participate. We want this place to be welcoming and engaging, and we encourage everyone – visitors, events presenters, volunteers and collective members – to be proactive in creating an atmosphere where the safety of others is validated. In this spirit, we are survivor centric and survivor oriented, and violence, abuse, sexual assault and discrimination will not be tolerated.

Everyone entering Pocketbooks is asked to be aware of their language and behavior, and to think about whether it might be harmful to others. We define oppressive behavior as any conduct that demeans, marginalizes, rejects, threatens or harms anyone on the basis of ability, activist experience, age, cultural background, education,

ethnicity, gender, immigration status, language, nationality, physical appearance, race, religion, self-expression, sexual orientation, species, status as a parent or other such factors.

By entering Pocketbooks, and/or participating in Pocketbooks events and activities, you agree to abide by the following guidelines:

- Respect peoples' opinions, beliefs, experiences and differing points of view.
- Respect everyone's identity and background, including pronouns and names. Do not assume anyone's gender identity, sexual preference, survivor status, economic status, background, health, etc.
- Respect everyone's physical and emotional boundaries. Check in in before discussing topics that may be triggering (e.g. sexual abuse, physical violence or encounters with police), and use trigger warnings during presentations and events. Physical and/or verbal threats will not be tolerated at Pocketbooks under any circumstances. Disruptive individuals may be asked to leave the space.
- Be responsible for your own actions; be aware that your actions have an effect on others, despite what your intentions may be. Listen and change your behavior if someone tells you that you are making them uncomfortable.
- Be aware of your prejudices and privileges and the space you take up at Pocketbooks.
- Alcohol is permitted only during pre approved special events, and we request that it be used with moderation at those times.

The collective members and staffers at Pocketbooks are empowered to enforce these rules. If you cannot abide by the guidelines mentioned above, Pocketbooks reserves the right to ask you to leave.

If you experience harassment, abuse, or sexual assault, or if a perpetrator of sexual violence is interfering with your participation or presence at an event or in a space, please approach a Pocketbooks collective member or staffer whom you feel

comfortable talking to in person or via email. They are here to help with any conflicts arising from the violation of our policies.

We welcome the continuing discussion about and improvement of this policy.

People have always been good at imagining the end of the world, which is much easier to picture than the strange sidelong paths of change in a world without end.

– Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the dark*

CHAPTER 4 | POCKETBOOKS' *STRANGE SIDELONG PATH OF CHANGE*: THE HISTORY AND MISSION OF A FEMINIST BOOKSTORE AND A SAFER SPACE

INTRODUCTION

Since Pocketbooks first opened on the Lower East Side in 1999, its mission has been outlined in an official Mission Statement that proclaims the community's values, aims, and vision(s) of a more just society. As with many other feminist communities built upon reflexivity and intentionality, bookshop volunteers have edited the statement over the years to reflect the ways in which the community's relationship(s) with feminism and liberatory politics have changed and evolved. In late 2012, the Pocketbooks community began referring to the shop explicitly as a "safer space," and soon thereafter posted a Safer Space Policy in store and online to be read in conjunction with their Mission Statement. The policy, as volunteers told me, is a way to articulate some of the expectations for those who enter the shop, but nevertheless, publishing the safer space policy "didn't really change anything. It was always a safer space even if we didn't explicitly call it that," one Collective member told me.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: First, I explore the history of Pocketbooks, including its (changing) Mission Statement and relationship(s) with feminism(s), for whom and how the shop has provided a community space, its relationship with the rest of the city

and other activist movements, and the ways in which the shop's history echoes literatures on feminist counterpublics and prefigurative politics. Second, I unpack the ways in which volunteers' imaginings of safety reflect their ideal(s) of a better society, which I refer to as the *safe imaginary*. In unpacking this safe imaginary, I consider what volunteers understand (un)safe to mean, how "safe" corresponds to the mission of creating a more equal society, and perceptions of the limitations of this imaginary. With participants' perspectives positioned centrally to my analysis, safety emerges as a concept inexorably linked with notions of structural violence, (in)justice, inclusivity, and hope. This chapter situates the community's understandings of (un)safety in relation to the previous chapter and illustrates that the safe imaginary is not arbitrary but has grown out of feminist antiviolence politics.

(1) POCKETBOOKS: MORE THAN JUST A BOOKSTORE

(1.1) A WOMEN'S COMMUNITY SPACE AND "LESBIAN BOOKSTORE"

In 1999, Lucy, a 23-year-old woman, founded Pocketbooks Women's Bookstore on the Lower East Side of Manhattan with some inheritance money, an anonymous business partner, and a handful of volunteers. Although Pocketbooks opened towards the end of the women's bookstore movement—which, due to changes in the book industry and the rise of Amazon.com, had declined by the late 1990s and early 2000s (McGrath, 2004)—Pocketbooks nevertheless carried with it the legacy of that movement. A place to circulate women's discourse, promote women's writing, and build community, Pocketbooks was "never just a bookstore," as an older customer shared with me, a sentiment common to those who populated women's bookstores during the feminist movement of the 1970s, 1980s, and

1990s (see: "More than just a bookstore" by Liddle, 2005). As Hogan (2016) writes of the feminist bookstore movement, these bookstores were "not simply… places to find books but… organizations in which bookwomen worked together to develop ethical feminist reading practices that, in turn, informed relational practices" (Hogan, 2016: xv); they were crucial to the "late-twentieth-century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic" (Fraser, 1990: 67).

When the shop first opened, Pocketbooks sold new and used books primarily focused on feminism and stocked authors like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan. True to the sentiment that "a bookstore run by feminists is different from a bookstore with a feminist section in it" (Hogan, 2008: 595), Pocketbooks also hosted a wide variety of community events—both one-off events and regular monthly ones—such as Women's Open Mic Night and Dyke Knitting Circle, both of which are still popular events in the store even today. There was also a small café area in which to read and discuss these books, which also provided community space for bookwomen[15] to engage in conversation and networking, and to support one another without the dominating presence of men. The shop was not just a place to read and sell books; like Hogan (2008) has said about other women's bookstores, Pocketbooks actively "claimed public space for the feminist movement" (2008: 595).

A few women who frequented the shop in its early days told me that what primarily drew them to Pocketbooks was community space curated through events, literary activism, and fellow bookwomen. One older lesbian woman I spoke to, Sherry, told me she had been coming to Pocketbooks since it first opened. Because Sherry was a poetry and creative

[15] "Bookwomen" is a term I borrow from Hogan (2016) for women who participate(d) in the women's bookstore movement.

writing teacher, I assumed that she was primarily interested in the books, but she told me otherwise. Shery's comment resonates with the way Chrissy spoke about the Village of her teenage, as a place to find like-minded people. She said:

> I've been coming here since they opened, and I was in the neighborhood ten years before that. I remember being really excited that they opened, and I used to come in all the time in the beginning, *just to see what was going on.* –Sherry (my italics)

Coincidentally, Sherry and I first met in the café area over coffee and books after she struck up a casual conversation with me. In the true spirit of the community aspect of Pocketbooks, another woman of a similar age to Sherry, who had been sitting nearby, overheard our conversation and echoed her point about the community back in Pocketbooks' formative years. Over a decade and a half later, the spirit of meeting and conversing with people over coffee was still intact.

Sherry also said that it was nice to be in a place that was focused on women, and she said that there were rarely, if ever, any men around the shop. That Pocketbooks acted as a community space primarily for women was a political intention, too. Upon its opening, Pocketbooks published a Mission Statement, explaining its commitment to fostering women's writing and cultivating the local women's community in New York City, much in line with the feminist bookstore movement that "establish[ed] the existence and scope of women's writing" (Hogan, 2008: 603). The original Mission Statement reads like a feminist manifesto:

> We are committed to providing the community with an in-depth, diverse, and varied collection of women-authored and women-related books, zines, periodicals, and other literature. Pocketbooks carries women's writing anywhere from major publishers to independent feminist presses to self-published works. The bookstore is also a community space open to readings, performances, art shows, benefits, meetings, workshops, a community bulletin board, networking, and generally any needs the women's community has that Pocketbooks can fill. We hope to bridge the gaps, close the divisions, and open

> communication in the women's community of New York City by serving as a community center as well as a doorway to and support for women's writing. –Pocketbooks Mission Statement, 1999

Owing to the number of lesbian bookwomen in the space and the surrounding "gay" neighborhood, volunteers and customers affectionately referred to Pocketbooks during its early years as a "lesbian bookstore," not unlike other bookstores at the time (see Hogan, 2016). Sherry explained how, in many ways, Pocketbooks not only contributed to feminist literary activism, but also acted as a lesbian hangout in an informal network of lesbian spaces in Downtown Manhattan. Lesbian and female "camaraderie" was how she described what she found in Pocketbooks, as well as a physical place to develop their own underground culture—not unlike the lesbian bars and cafes nearby at the time. Here is what Sherry said about the literary scene and lesbian spaces:

> There was a really vital lesbian poetry scene in New York long before the slams and the spoken word. We were doing that, and we had been very influenced by all of the Black and Puerto Rican poetry that oral spoken word stuff that was out there….it was very exciting, the poets were really revolutionaries. And Audre Lorde was a part of that…. there used to be these women's poetry readings all over the city and people would flock to these things, they were packed…. We had all of these lesbian journals, and we had all of these lesbian bars…. So, there was kind of an underground camaraderie. And you know, a lot of us knew each other, and we were building on stuff that we were doing. –Sherry

Sherry's memory bears strong resemblance to Chrissy's description of her "gay neighborhood" in Downtown Manhattan, as I shared in the previous chapter ("We were creating *our own* community," Chrissy had said). That Pocketbooks was a haven for lesbians was a feature common to feminist bookstores during this period. Feminist bookstores often acted as "a safe place to connect with other lesbians in addition to the 'paper lesbians' they read about in books" (Spain, 2016:108). Moreover, "The books, and the people in the store, helped women understand who they were and what they wanted to become"; and for many

women, this meant helping them come out as lesbian (Spain, 2016: 108). Pocketbooks was no exception to this theme, and the few lesbians I spoke with remember the shop fondly for being a community space not just for women but especially for gay women.

For reasons I elaborate in the following section, much like similar bookstores at the time, Pocketbooks soon found itself "grappling with and participating in defining…feminist accountability" (Hogan 2016: xiv). Part of the process of Pocketbooks (re)defining accountability was considering ways in which their own community and mission might (re)produce the social exclusions in society writ large. In 2000, the Pocketbooks Mission Statement was re-written to explicitly name other forms of discrimination other than sexism and homophobia, such as racism and class, for example. While this newer Mission Statement still identified the bookstore as a *women's* place, marking its primary audience as women and lesbians, it called for a much broader "social, economic, and environmental justice." Additionally, it marked the bookstore as a site for political mobilization and highlighted the importance collective organization, foreshadowing what was to come in successive iterations of the bookstore.

> Pocketbooks, an independent women's bookstore and cafe of New York City's Lower East Side, promotes the empowerment of women through words, art and activism. We work to be an intersection of dialogue and information exchange, providing women-focused books, events, workshops, and a meeting and gathering place. Recognizing the *links between oppressions*, our goal is to be trans-inclusive, multi-lingual, open to all sexualities and spiritualities, intergenerational and to challenge racism, classism, ablism, sexism, ageism and sizism. We have adopted a collective structure, and we strive to be an organizing site in the struggle for social, economic, and environmental justice. –Pocketbooks Mission Statement, 2000

The evolution of feminism at Pocketbooks would continue, but not before facing an insurmountable obstacle. As I shared in the previous chapter, urban (re)development and Giuliani's "quality of life" campaign would soon reclaim neighborhoods in the city,

including the Lower East Side, where Pocketbooks was located. Gentrification and the urban redevelopment project were well underway by the early 2000s, and Pocketbooks' neighborhood was changing rapidly. As I shared in the previous chapter, with the influx of trendy boutiques and high-rise apartment buildings, rent prices soared and forced many small business and residents out of the area. To make matters worse, on September 11, 2001, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center—which occurred only a few neighborhoods away from Pocketbooks—catapulted the nation not only into a period of profound grief, but also one of economic risk and uncertainty (Grogan, Ichniowski and Daniels, 2001; Malehorn, 2001; Ratajczak, 2002; Roberts, 2001). As part of the collateral damage, many shops in New York were forced to close their doors, and small businesses were especially vulnerable to closure (Grinker, 2005). As an independent bookstore, Pocketbooks had never been financially prosperous (and moreover, that had never been the goal), but after September 11, the shop experienced new levels of financial strain. This economic uncertainty was only magnified with bookstore chains like Barnes & Noble and the rise of Amazon.com, which posed a threat to independent bookstores everywhere (Roychoudhuri, 2010).

Lucy, the Pocketbooks owner, was determined to keep Pocketbooks open, despite economic pressures to close its doors. However, to keep the shop afloat, Lucy was forced to disband the Collective in 2002, simply because there was not enough money to pay other workers. For a while, Lucy attempted to manage the place on her own, and it looked like Pocketbooks might have a chance to survive, even if it was run by a single person rather than a small group of people. However, running the store on her own proved an onerous task, and, wanting to pursue other interests, Lucy decided to leave the city behind to start an

MBA program, taking with her significant debt, a result of trying to run the bookstore herself. It looked as though—like many other shops across the city—Pocketbooks would close its doors permanently with her departure and yet another counterpublic space would be (re)claimed by the city. Like other bookwomen at the time, Lucy and the Pocketbooks community were confronted with being revolutionaries within a capitalist system (see: Hogan, 2016: xv).

(1.2) SHIFTING TOWARDS INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM

The beginning of the next era of Pocketbooks is often recited like an origin myth by volunteers, where facts and hyperbole become indistinguishable, but the key events of the story are nonetheless verifiable. Underneath the enthusiastically recited embellishments is a story about Pocketbooks' ideological transition from second-wave to intersectional feminism, one wholeheartedly lauded by most of the volunteers at the time of my fieldwork, and embodied in a new Mission Statement and collective organizing model. Although Pocketbooks opened in 1999, the reopening that happened a few years later is what most volunteers perceive as the ideological foundation of the shop today.

The day Pocketbooks was set to close—or so goes the origin myth—Caroline, an independently wealthy woman, rescued the store from its impending closure. One volunteer told me, "Literally, Pocketbooks was meant to close that day! And Caroline just came and bought it!" While the timeline of Caroline's arrival is a matter of debate, the following is nonetheless true: In a rapid series of events, Caroline took over the lease, assembled a six-person Collective and purchased new furniture for the store. Enacting a radical do-it-

yourself (DIY) ethos, an ethos that has been theorized as "a means of re-approaching power" (Holtzman et al., 2007: 44), the new Collective took the store into their own hands quite literally. They repainted the store's awning, and in doing so, changed the bookstore's identity radically: "Women's" was removed from the bookstore's name, with the word not even featuring in shop's tagline. "Pocketbooks Women's Bookstore" became "Pocketbooks, a radical bookstore on the Lower East Side." Meanwhile, the new Collective expanded the book selection to include titles related to anti-capitalism, racism and race, queer and gender theory, and radical politics and activism. The store would remain open, but this new ideological stance was intended to invite a broader audience, to provide space for people other than women.

Many of these changes were made because the new Collective felt that the type of feminism Pocketbooks had previously embodied was exclusionary and outdated. Jessa, who was a Collective member during my fieldwork, shared her criticisms of the feminism the bookstore represented in the years that Lucy ran the shop. She said, "At the time, feminism wasn't as intersectionally focused, and there were still a lot of second-wave feminists." Elaborating, Jessa explained that this meant Pocketbooks had become a place for predominately white cisgender women and lesbians, but less so for other people who face structural violence, too (e.g., people of color, transgender people, working class people). Several other volunteers during my fieldwork also described the previous iteration of the bookstore as "second-wavey," which had become a catchphrase for "bad" feminism—antiquated, even discriminatory. Another former Collective member said, "The feminism that the original Pocketbooks was espousing was not in line with where feminism is now."

For a while, the community felt the need to disassociate from feminism because it "wasn't seen as cool or radical anymore. It was something your mom did," Jessa told me. So, not only did they drop "Women's" from the bookshop name, but they also eschewed the word "feminism for a while both in store and in the media" for about a decade. In its place, the store became "anarchist, but a queer anarchist," Jessa said, who added that the politics were best understood as "intersectional." Although Pocketbooks remained a place that was primarily accessed and occupied by women and/or queer people because of its history and reputation, the community made a more conscious effort to bring more types of marginalized people into leadership roles. For example, the Collective made the decision to include people who were not cisgender women—such as people who were transgender (both men and women), genderqueer, and even cisgender men—onto the Collective itself.

This ideological shift represents changes that were occurring in feminist movements nationally and globally; changes in the shop's name and use of language, Mission Statement, and book stock reflect this shift towards third-wave feminism. Third-wave feminism critiques second-wave feminism for focusing too much on the lives of upper-middle class white women while ignoring the lives of women who do not fit into this mold; third-wave feminism seeks a more intersectional[16] lens, one that considers how other systems of oppression—such as race, class, ability, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality—intersect, overlap, and influence the ways in which people are discriminated. Much like feminists around the nation were engaged in a process of critically evaluating their feminist beliefs

[16] The term "intersectionality" was first introduced by Black legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, as a lens to understand the ways in which forms of inequality overlap and intersect; her article was initially an exploration of the unique forms of discrimination Black women experience as a result of their gender and race (Crenshaw, 1989).

and practices, so too were the feminists at Pocketbooks, who concluded that second-wave feminism excluded people in favor of more privileged white women. Wanting to be a place inclusive to people at all margins of society—and not wanting to unconsciously reproduce systems of oppression in their endeavor to liberate women—the Collective and wider Pocketbooks community actively decided to embrace intersectional feminism. Pocketbooks is—and always has been—in a dialectic with the world in which it is embedded, including feminist discourse.

In addition to dropping "Women's" from the bookstore name and choosing to sell a wider selection of books, the new Collective, assembled by Caroline, decided to rewrite the Mission Statement to better reflect their values and purpose. Building from the 2000 Mission Statement, this version states its intention to "challenge hierarchy and *all* systems of oppression… not limited to patriarchy." Moreover, this version pronounces a more ambitious aim: a commitment towards the realization of a *society*—not just local space—that "is infinitely creative, truly democratic, equitable, ecological, and free." The Mission Statement, posted in store and online, reads as follows:

> Pocketbooks is an independent bookstore, café, and activist resource center, located in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Through words, art, food, activism, education, and community, we strive to create a space that welcomes and empowers all people. We actively support movements that challenge hierarchy and all systems of oppression, including but not limited to patriarchy, heterosexism, the gender binary, white supremacy and classism, within society as well as our own movements. We seek to make our space and resources available to such movements for meetings, events, and research. Additionally, we offer educational programming that promotes centered, strategic, and visionary thinking, towards the realization of a society that is infinitely creative, truly democratic, equitable, ecological, and free. –Pocketbooks Mission Statement, 2002-2015

Embracing a worker's cooperative model—with workers jointly owning the bookshop and collectively making decisions—enabled Pocketbooks to more fully embody the type of ideal society that the community was working towards: a non-hierarchical (or at

least, less hierarchical) one antithetical to capitalist work structures. As has been said of collectives in feminist bookstores, "in avoiding what they saw as male-model capitalism based on hierarchical relations, collectives tried to create a non-exploitive way to operate, one that emphasized participatory democracy, and community" (Spain, 2016: 87-88). Paid an hourly rate, Collective members worked nearly every shift at the store, aided by a handful of unpaid volunteers.

This new mission and implementation of a worker's cooperative model reflect Pocketbooks' embrace of prefigurative politics, as I described in Chapter 1. Although prefiguration was hinted at even in earlier iterations of the shop (Lucy also assembled a collective at one point, for example), it only became the community's explicit strategy for social change and part of the mission in 2002. Because of the community's shift from second-wave to intersectional feminism and commitment to identifying and contesting "the inequalities within their own [space]" (Ishkanian and Peña Saavedra, 2019: 986), Pocketbooks can be said to have newly embodied "intersectional prefiguration" (see: Ishkanian and Peña Saavedra, 2019).

For a short while, Pocketbooks saw some financial success, and in 2005, the store expanded by taking over the space next door, doubling in size. As a few people like to recall, volunteers literally knocked the walls down themselves, sporting the Pocketbooks DIY approach to creating change. However, this period of financial stability did not last long. Once again, Pocketbooks was presented with the challenge of being revolutionary in a capitalist society, of being value-driven in a city that thrives on profit, and more generally, still being embedded in structures of power. In 2008, the "Great Recession" (Grusky,

Western and Wimer, 2011) hit Manhattan hard and sales plummeted at Pocketbooks. Before they knew it, the Collective was faced with the likelihood of store closure once more.

The Collective, who recognized that this community space was invaluable to so many people, refused to leave the bookshop behind; they made a difficult decision, one that would have long-lasting effects on the shop's worker structure. They decided they would no longer accept pay for their work, and all Pocketbooks workers would be unpaid volunteers. Needless to say, this decision had repercussions for the non-hierarchical cooperative model. Without pay, many of the Collective members were forced to leave Pocketbooks altogether to find paid work, or at the very least, cut back significantly on their hours at Pocketbooks. Consequently, the pool of volunteers at Pocketbooks expanded significantly, with volunteers taking over some major responsibilities that had previously been the remit of Collective members. There remained a Collective responsible for "bottom-lining"[17] major store operations, dealing with financial matters, and staffing some shifts, but without pay, Collective members could no longer be on every shift, nor could there be a Collective member in store at all times. This change would have everlasting consequences for the worker structure, many of which endured more than a decade later and into my fieldwork, and prompted volunteers to consider whether this unpaid labor is a form of exploitation, even if it ensures the shop's survival—a point to which I return in Chapter 7.

These changes, however, allowed Pocketbooks to remain open on the Lower East Side and arguably ensured the shop's survival for over a decade. Many other feminist

[17] "Bottom-lining" is a word used by the Pocketbooks community to describe ensuring that tasks are completed; similar to "managing," but with horizontal connotations

bookstores, which did not adapt in the same way as Pocketbooks, were forced to close.[18] As an analysis of the next few years illustrate, however, the paradoxical nature of being a revolutionary space in a capitalist and unjust society does not only impose limitations but also affords emancipatory possibilities, too. As Fraser (1990) says, in a stratified society, the fact that a feminist counterpublic is *not* an isolated "enclave" is precisely where its "emancipatory potential resides" (1990: 68). Although counterpublics allow for regrouping and reprieve, "they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Fraser, 1990: 68). Being part of the city—not a space apart from it—is what would pave way for Pocketbooks to be not only a haven but also a site of mobilization.

(1.4) BOUNDEDNESS, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, AND BUILDING COMMUNITY

Although I have primarily discussed Pocketbooks' internal values and goals, as the geography around the bookstore transformed, Pocketbooks came to take on a more agitational and adversarial role than ever before. More opportunities emerged to collaborate with other spaces, social movements, and protests, and volunteers recalled that the years between 2011-2014 were characterized by a noticeable rise in engagement with other activism and activists.

One of these movements was Occupy Wall Street (OWS), which began as a protest movement in Zuccotti Park, in the Financial District of Manhattan. OWS positioned itself

[18] In 1997, there were an estimated 175 feminist bookstores in North America, yet only 44 remaining by 2004 (McGrath, 2004). By the time I showed up to my fieldwork, there were only 13 bookstores that self-identified as feminist (Enjeti, 2014), a point that volunteers were quick to point out.

"in opposition to the intensification of global capitalism, which has spurred a resurgence of urban enclosure, transferring public property into private ownership" (Bolton, Froese and Jeffrey, 2013). In an attempt to challenge growing social inequality caused by neoliberalism and hoarding of financial capital (Calhoun, 2013), OWS also adopted prefiguration as political strategy; OWS prefiguration focused on direct democracy consensus, a model where anyone can participate and everybody gets a say in decision making (Maharawal, 2013). Similar to Pocketbooks, OWS has been described as a place forged by "utopian socialists who tried to demonstrate their ideal of a better society by organizing communes" (Calhoun, 2013).

Pocketbooks openly and formally supported the efforts of OWS, and to assist the movement in ways they could, the Collective opted to offer a formal welcome to the "Occupiers"—the name given to the OWS activists camping in Zuccotti Park. For example, Pocketbooks offered free coffee to the Occupiers, who were encouraged to hang out in the shop without the pressure of having to buy anything, a rarity in Manhattan. Free coffee is typically reserved only for volunteers, and as such, this gesture explicitly marked Occupiers as members of the Pocketbooks community, not merely guests. As conditions were often less than ideal at OWS, and Pocketbooks was only a thirty or so minute walk from Zuccotti Park, many of them gratefully accepted this offer, which paved the way for OWS activists to integrate into the Pocketbooks community more significant ways, too. When I carried out interviews, I learned that many of the volunteers I regularly interacted with had first found Pocketbooks when they were involved with OWS. Long after OWS had ended, they still volunteered at Pocketbooks. Consider the following volunteer's comment, who discovered the shop as an OWS activist on a coffee run:

> I came here during Occupy…I just started hanging out here because I was in such a high stimulation environment and I just wanted a safe space, a place to come and just drink some coffee and be in a warm place and relax. And then Occupy ended—well, got kicked out of the park—and I was still interested in having a radical community that was a little more rooted. I knew it was always here, people with a like-minded nature…. And the thing about New York is, in a small town, your community is who you live next to, and here you have to be intentional… it doesn't just happen. So, it's been a godsend for me in that way, having a place to build community. The book selection is great, don't get me wrong. And the events are great, too. But it's really about being around folks… yeah, just having a community. –Justin

While Pocketbooks helped facilitate an agitational movement by giving a resting place to its activists, so, too was Pocketbooks transformed by opening its community space. OWS activists, many of whom were well-versed in strategies of resistance and consensus-based decision making, brought with them their own knowledge and skills, thereby expanding the breadth of knowledge within the Pocketbooks community. In fact, during my fieldwork, Justin often acted as a mediator in difficult conversations because he had previous experience in nonviolent communication in activist spaces.

OWS was not the only social movement for which Pocketbooks leveraged its space. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, spurred on by the unlawful NYPD murder of Eric Garner, a Black American, sparked a series of protests in 2014. In rage over the nation's institutional racism and systemic violence against Black people, and in sympathy with BLM organizers, Pocketbooks acted as a site of reprieve and mobilization during the height of BLM protests. Several volunteers recalled making BLM posters in the café area of the shop, participating in ongoing private messages about where the next protests were taking place, and walking together from the shop to Union Square (at 14th Street) to march at BLM protests. Additionally, as Pocketbooks typically holds events in the store, they reserved many of the event times for BLM activists to raise awareness of the movement. By hosting these events, Pocketbooks acted as a kind of "brokerage" (see: Martin and Miller, 2006), as

a mediator between the BLM movement and public audiences, an important strategy for contentious politics.

Paradoxically, Pocketbooks' visibility also drew dangers. Despite being a place to seek freedom from the violence on the streets, Pocketbooks paradoxically became a place where they became surveilled. Undercover police officers would visit the space periodically, keeping tabs on BLM activists they deemed threatening. Volunteers recalled feeling vulnerable and suspicious during the height of BLM protests, a feeling that has since endured. This paradoxicality echoes what Chrissy said about the Village; despite being a gay sanctuary, it could nevertheless *attract* homophobic violence, too. Nevertheless, several volunteers recalled this period fondly and told me that Pocketbooks was at its most powerful when actively participating in protests like BLM.

(1.4) RECLAIMING FEMINISM AND BECOMING A SAFER SPACE

In 2014, Pocketbooks began embracing the word "feminism" in store, online, and in the media again; as feminism was experiencing a resurgence,[19] it was no longer seen as something Pocketbooks needed to disassociate itself from. Jessa said:

> In 2014, Rasa was the first one who started using 'feminism' again in our media. And then Mary after that. And that was around the time when a lot of feminist books were best sellers, like *Bad feminist* and *Men explain things to me*. Feminist books in the mainstream world were doing well. –Jessa

Towards the end of 2015, a few months into my fieldwork, the Mission Statement was edited to make explicit Pocketbooks' commitment to intersectionality, trans-affirming

[19] Some scholars argue that feminism has now entered a fourth wave, which has been enabled by Internet interventions (see: Munro, 2013; Rivers, 2017).

feminism, and working non-hierarchically. Nevertheless, its core message and ideology remained relatively unchanged. Many volunteers did not even realize the statement had been rewritten; I only noticed because I frequently reviewed the statement and policy for my fieldwork. The edited Mission Statement reads as follows:

> Pocketbooks seeks to empower all people to challenge oppression and participate in creating a society which is equitable, cooperative, and free by:
>
> - Distributing literature and resources about oppression, *intersectionality*, community organizing, and activism, and by sharing the stories of marginalized people
> - Maintaining a space in New York City for dialogue, education, and reflection where all people are respected; and
> - Building connections, knowledge, and skills in our communities
>
> Pocketbooks seeks to embody and share the principles of *intersectional trans-affirming feminisms and support liberatory social movements*. Pocketbooks strives to empower our volunteer workers through non-hierarchy, cooperation, and collective-based decision making*, providing an example of the society we are working toward*.
>
> –Pocketbooks Mission Statement, December 2015 - present (my italics)

While the Mission Statement was relatively unchanged, something else *had* changed. On the Mission Statement's webpage, a link was added to take the reader to something new: a Safer Space Policy. The policy, as suggested its first paragraph, acts a guideline for behaviors, which in turn, can help bring about "the kind of society we are working toward." The policy says:

> Pocketbooks Bookstore's safer space policy is intended to help Pocketbooks be a supportive, nonthreatening environment for all who participate. We want this place to be welcoming and engaging, and we encourage everyone – visitors, events presenters, volunteers and Collective members – to be proactive in creating an atmosphere where the safety of others is validated. In this spirit, we are survivor centric and survivor oriented, and violence, abuse, sexual assault and discrimination will not be tolerated. –Pocketbooks Safer Space Policy

As it was later clarified, discussions about writing a safer space policy began in 2012, and in April 2013, Pocketbooks published their first policy on the bookstore website.

The following year, a few minor revisions were made, and the policy was posted physically in the store for the first time. Writing the policy was initiated by a single Collective member, Zinn (who was no longer volunteering during my fieldwork), whose draft has been used as a template for safe spaces on university campuses:

> The Safer Space Policy was started, we came up with it. It was me, Zinn, Sandy, and Fran on the Collective. It was 2013 maybe, 2012—somewhere around there. Zinn was the one who mostly wrote it and then we edited it. Zinn was had been involved in a lot of safer spaces, organizing; they spoke a lot and drafted the original policy. This was before safe spaces were an issue on college campuses, and our safer space policy was actually used as a basis because it was one of the first ones that was really out there for people to copy and use. –Jessa

The policy was not a replacement for the Mission Statement. Instead, the policy translates intersectional feminist values into behavioral guidelines; while the Mission Statement is more like a manifesto, the Safer Space Policy acts more like a "how to" guide.[20] As volunteers reiterated, though, when the policy was first published, the guidelines indicated were not new but reflective of the behaviors already expected of people in the space. Jessa explained:

> We were definitely into it. I don't think there was any opposition to it. I think at the time it was not as well known, so it was like, 'Yeah let's have this, it's great.' It's kind of like what we did anyway. It was kind of just putting it in writing, online and on the website. –Jessa

One volunteer added that the addition of a policy "didn't really change anything. It was always a safer space even if we didn't explicitly call it that." Jessa reiterated this comment, and said, "It didn't change anything. It was just written, but it was the same practices."

[20] More of the details of the policy will be unpacked in Section 2 and throughout this dissertation, but the policy is roughly divided into four sections: its purpose, naming violence, actionable guidelines, and dealing with breaches/instances of violence.

Although I am primarily interested in the ways in which participants conceptualize safety, it is nevertheless worth considering why safety became incorporated into the ideological language of Pocketbooks and how "safer space" was chosen as metaphor for describing their method of political organizing. Why did Pocketbooks need an explicit Safer Space Policy if the expectations were there without one? One possible answer to this question was illuminated in a discussion group I attended and facilitated about what it means for Pocketbooks to act as a safer space. Chrissy, who had been coming to the store since its "lesbian bookstore" days, lamented that the shop even had a policy at all, although she understood its necessity. At one point she said, "Why do we need one? Can't we just use common sense?" Another volunteer responded:

> Well, no. The reason we need a policy is because the guidelines here are *not* common sense to most people. What is common sense to a lot of people is unsafe, and what we are doing is *different* from everywhere else. That's why we need spell out expectations for them. –Aly

Chrissy conceded Aly's point, but she said that she wished we had the kind of community where these expectations were common sense, where people did not need a reminder of how to behave in a nonviolent, nondiscriminatory way. Although Chrissy did not press the issue further, she hinted that the bookshop used to be a place where these guidelines *were* common sense, and it had only changed in more recent years as both the neighborhood and Pocketbooks' demographics had shifted. By 2012, when the policy was suggested, Downtown Manhattan was no longer the "gay playground" Chrissy had once described. As another volunteer lamented, "Do you know of any lesbian bars around here these days? I don't." The publishing of this policy, far from indicating a new way of interacting with one another, marked the deterioration of shared countercultural and subversive values in Downtown Manhattan. What was new in this era (i.e., when

Pocketbooks became an explicit "safer space") was not the behaviors outlined in the policy, but the shop's orientation to the neighborhoods around it. As the neighborhood's safety eroded (as perceived by the Pocketbooks community), the bookshop itself became more of an oasis and its surroundings more adversarial.

Additionally, the "safer space" designation carries symbolic value, too. As anthropologists have long recognized, the language and metaphors we use shape our understandings of our relationships with one another, the places we inhabit, and the lives we lead (see: Aden et al., 2010). Moreover, drawing "boundary around the concept of violence" (Frazer and Hutchings, 2019: 13) is not a new political tactic; the naming of violence is essential to feminist politics (2019). In asserting itself as an explicit safer space, Pocketbooks denotes the rest of the city—if not beyond that—as *unsafe*, as (re)producing violence. Additionally, in claiming a designation like "safer space," Pocketbooks implies that *this* space is different. The following section is dedicated to exploring this safe imaginary and unpacking the safe space metaphor.

(2) THE SAFE IMAGINARY

(2.1) SAFE FROM WHAT?: NAMING STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION AND ITS EVERYDAY MANIFESTATIONS AS "VIOLENCE"

Nearly every volunteer I spoke with delineated boundaries around safer spaces from the geographies around them.[21] Chrissy, for example, said, "The idea of a safe space came out of…the idea that the rest of the world is not a safe space, and that's absolutely correct."

[21] Despite this rather binary way of referring to safe spaces, volunteers complicate this conception later in the chapter, arguing that the boundary around a safe space is inevitably porous.

Moreover, volunteers reiterated that safe spaces are a response to the systemic oppression of marginalized people, and this oppression—including its everyday manifestations—is a form of (structural) violence.[22] While systemic oppression can manifest in many ways (one volunteer told me that a safe space here probably means something very different to a safe space in Afghanistan, seeing as power manifests differently in different contexts), consider what one volunteer, Justin, said, about the American context:

> Now when we're saying safer space within American society and American oppression... you think safety, and the opposite of safety is violence. And to me it's less about overt violence—although there's absolutely that—but providing a safe space from oppression and how it manifests every day… even the micro-violence of getting misgendered every day, or having to explain your identity or sexual orientation, and so on. –Justin

Moreover, volunteers acknowledged that structural violence—although upheld by institutions—can also be (re)produced through people's actions and behaviors (or, we might say, in their habitus). This point is implicit in Justin's comment about the "micro-violence of getting misgendered every day, or having to explain your identity or sexual orientation." The second paragraph of the Safer Space Policy also acknowledges that oppression is not something that exists outside of us but something that we—as social beings—embody and enact; therefore, we have the ability not only to (re)produce violence, but also to modify our behaviors and reduce the extent of that violence. Accordingly, the policy says:

> Everyone entering Pocketbooks is asked to be aware of their language and behavior, and to think about whether it might be harmful to others. We define oppressive behavior as any conduct that demeans, marginalizes, rejects, threatens or harms anyone on the basis of ability, activist experience, age, cultural background, education, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, language, nationality, physical appearance, race, religion, self-expression, sexual orientation, species, status as a parent or other such factors.[23]

[22] Participants were well-versed in the language of structural violence and would refer to systemic oppression both as "structural violence," or simply, "violence."

[23] Following this paragraph, the policy lays out examples of how people can behave and treat one another in ways that do not discriminate or undermine other people, and in Chapter 5 I delve into some of these cultural

Moreover, as I explained in Chapter 1 and reiterated in Chapter 3, structural violence regulates the ways in which people move through everyday space and impacts their feelings of ontological (in)security. Other volunteers explained similar experiences and feelings to Chrissy shared in the previous chapter:

> 'Unsafe' is probably the general state of being—that almost-constant awareness that is necessary for women. So, for instance, I was walking to the bus at midnight, and you know, chose my walk based on what streets were more populated, didn't wear my headphones because I had to be more aware of safety. The world generally has created a volatile environment for women and other minority groups. –Ana

> Even again something so basic as just…walking through the streets or whatever, there's a certain way people will look at you or something, or you know, sexist or misogynistic comments, or just those sorts of things… that scrutinizing look or that look of disgust. Even just such basic things like that… –Sunny

> Typically, when I'm in a male-dominated space, I feel really unsafe. I think there are some spaces that get a bit violent—not necessarily in attacking you, but the space is angry. –Caity

These comments highlight the ways in which people from marginalized backgrounds may feel vulnerable in spaces that may nevertheless be seen as "neutral," like a street, for example. Moreover, volunteers expressed an intersectional understanding of "unsafe," too. By that I mean that they understood public spaces as (un)safe in different ways for different people, based on factors like race, gender, class, and more. Three people I spoke with articulated this point in the following ways:

> The world is a tremendously unsafe space. So much of it is just indifferent to your experience. And the further you deviate from a particular color and shape and sound, the more indifferent most sources of power in this world are to your experience. And it's through collective hard work that spaces that can be respites from that, exist. So, if you don't

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norms. But for now, I wish to highlight that the Pocketbooks community does not conceive of unsafety in abstract terms; it is something enacted and reproduced through everyday behavior.

> have a particular color, shape, size, etc., your experience of the NYPD, to pick one example, is totally different. –Alex, a white, heterosexual man

> I feel like it's different for me than it is for someone else who might feel more unsafe due to certain circumstances…For me, my home has always been safe, pretty much. Even at school, because I'm white and straight passing, I'm cis and everything, for me I never really felt unsafe just existing somewhere. Maybe if I just reveal certain things about myself, but for the most part I can exist. But maybe people of color or people who aren't straight passing, who draw more active attention from other people, experience it worse. –Jana, a white, queer woman

> I walk around the street at night and feel safe. Safety means something different to different people. –Sal, a white man

As Jana's comments suggests, participants also acknowledged that identities alone do not correspond directly to their experiences of violence; the ways in which identities are *perceived* by others is what often makes the difference. "Passing" as straight (i.e., being read as heterosexual by an onlooker) allows Jana to avoid some forms of violence that other queer people might face, for example.

(2.2) COLLECTIVELY ENVISIONING A BETTER, SAFER WORLD: UTOPIAN IMAGINARIES

When discussing the mission of Pocketbooks as a safer space, volunteers reiterated that to create a safer space is to prefigure a micro-society of the one they wish to live in, one that is just and free. Compared to depictions of safe space practitioners as feeble and weak—who need to hide from the real world—I found that volunteers voiced expressions of defiance. Rather than accepting the "real world" around them as inevitable, as Muñoz (2009) writes about queer utopian longings, participants expressed "the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on the potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (2009: 1).

This other world would, volunteers said, is free from structural violence and discrimination, and therefore, safe; moreover, this safety enables all people, including those who are normally marginalized, to live freely and without fear. Consider the following comments made by volunteers which speak to this idea:

> I mean I think that it means we're trying to create a place we can collectively envision something better. And we can actively work towards that, creating it. One of the big criticisms is trigger warnings: 'The world doesn't have them so why the fuck should we give them to you? That's so stupid, you're so soft.' I don't turn what the world cares about or what it doesn't have. I'm not an idiot…. It's not about what presently exists but what could exist, what things could look like if we decided we valued different things…. I think it's about not accepting that what the world as it exists is the end all be all. There are other options. –Hope

> Safe is a space where the threat of discrimination or violence is non-existent, which is how it feels here. The world is unsafe but it's safe here. –Ana

> It's also this idea of radical love or radical kindness. I think the idea behind that is to really understand the multitude of experiences, not just identity that go into a person and their experiences and what can make them that way. And working with that person in a way that doesn't replicate terrible work standards, terrible social standards, terrible incarceration standards. It's inherently a place where we build the world where we want to live in—with no prisons, with no hierarchy, with conflict and a lot of debate, but not with that bullshit that keeps people down and keeps people silent. I guess ideally in a way it's supposed to make community, a group of people who come in and accept to being part of a community, and use their voices, use their personalities, use their skills to make that community grow and become closer. –Augosto

Two more volunteers reiterated Augosto's point. Rather than depicting safe spaces as places where people can retreat and withdraw from engaging with others, they describe all *other* places as disempowering for marginalized people, discouraging participation, and limiting expression. By contrast, safety is akin to having a "freedom to" (Lewis et al., 2015), or more generally to the necessity of security for freedom that philosophers wrote about decades ago:

> In the world—whether it's in terms of your identity or in terms of how you're exploited through labor, or just in life, through family relations, because of your ability or your non

> ability—your voice, your humanity gets taken away, even a little bit. You don't feel like you can express yourself. You feel like you can't make changes in the world, you feel like you're on a conveyer belt, someone's pushing you over, someone's pushing you down. The idea of safer spaces is to equalize that a little bit, to give people some room to express themselves. That includes being happy but also being angry, without necessarily being put into jail, because when some people are angry, they get put into jail. –Augusto

> In general, structures in the world at large, are dedicated towards maintaining the world… that also means that a lot of systems of privilege and oppression get reified and that often necessitates denying the experiences of people who challenge that, challenge that by saying racism exists, sexism exists… I think in a lot of ways, being a safer space is dedicated to not denying people's experiences. I think that there's also something that feels important to me is a commitment to acknowledge and honor the full chaotic messy beautiful of people's experiences and their emotional range. –Adelle

"Inclusivity" was another buzzword amongst volunteers. One Collective member told me explicitly that being a safer space means "being an open and inclusive space." However, at Pocketbooks, inclusivity does not mean that *everyone* is equally included, as the word might ordinarily suggest. Pocketbooks is "a space for people who are *marginalized*," as one volunteer told me, and "being inclusive doesn't mean 'anything goes.'" Another person said, "I think people are kind of muddled with what the idea of inclusion means. Inclusion to me does not mean everybody is [welcome]." He added that inclusion is about removing the barriers that prevent marginalized people from accessing the same spaces and resources that more privileged people already have at their disposal. One other Collective explained inclusivity in reaction to more exclusionary forms of feminism and queer activism:

> Inclusive means…have you read *Excluded* by Julia Serrano? That's what we mean by inclusivity. We mean that we are inclusive of [people who face] all forms of marginalization. If you're not, no it's not for you to come up and take up all the space, that's not what we mean by that…. When we say inclusive, we're specifically talking about exclusionary practices within marginalized communities against one another. And I think that word is loaded. We're talking about groups of gay men who can't put the patriarchy down around a lesbian bar…We're talking about trans-misogyny among queer women. We're talking about women identifying as women so loud and hard that they are enforcing the gender binary inadvertently. –Tina

Tina's understanding of inclusion is diametrically opposed to the homonormativity I outlined in Chapter 3 that facilitated the renovation of the Christopher Street Piers for white, gay men over the vulnerable queer youth of color. Not only does Tina mention this rather explicitly ("gay men who can't put the patriarchy down around a lesbian bar"), but she also clarifies that "we're specifically talking about exclusionary practices within marginalized communities against one another." Arguably, inclusivity is also what motivated the Collective to embrace a more intersectional feminism.

Finally, volunteers reiterated that as a safer space, Pocketbooks is survivor-oriented (the opening paragraph of the policy even says, "we are survivor centric and survivor oriented"), and that transformative justice is the ideal means for responding to conflict and violence. Transformative justice is a way of seeking justice outside of the police and prison-industrial complex—which participants viewed violent, racist, and classist—and strives to build an alternative, community-based model to tackle issues of abuse and violence. Moreover, transformative justice emphasizes accountability, in which the "offender" has an opportunity to learn, grow, and be rehabilitated, rather than simply be punished for their behavior. It is a liberatory approach that emphasizes tackling the root causes of violence (which are structural) rather than punishing the person for their "crime." Moreover, the needs of the survivor are prioritized in transformative justice models; survivors are believed and are given a say in the accountability process. One former Collective Member, who had experience in this process, proposed an addition to the Safer Space Policy that encapsulated this priority.[24] She wrote, "Pocketbooks is committed to privacy and confidentiality. As a

[24] Although her suggestion was not formally in the written policy, it nevertheless reflects how the community approached these cases —hence her suggestion for the addition to the text.

survivor-centered space, Pocketbooks will strive to center complaints and meet their needs in any accountability process." Nevertheless, being committed to protecting survivors, the community "is empowered to enforce these rules" and "reserves the right to ask [people] to leave" should they be breached, as the policy notes.

(2.3) THE LIMITS OF UTOPIAN IMAGINARIES

Several times, I heard Collective members referring to safe spaces as "utopian." The shop's book-buyer even advised me to read Cooper's (2013) book, *Everyday utopias*, to help me think through Pocketbooks' ambitions, a suggestion I have taken on board. Although volunteers often spoke of Pocketbooks and safer spaces in utopian terms, and referred to the shop as "in here" and the rest of the unsafe world as "out there," volunteers made it clear to me that they knew Pocketbooks cannot eliminate violence entirely. As a safer space, Pocketbooks has utopian *aspirations*, they told me, but being in an unsafe world, it has its limitations, too. For these reasons, several volunteers explained that it makes sense that Pocketbooks embraces the term "safer space," rather than "safe space." Consider these four very similar quotes from various volunteers:

> So then practically speaking, and I'm sure this is an idea that's come up pretty regularly: There is no such thing as a safe space, because you can't guarantee safety. So, we say 'safer' space. –Justin

> I like that there's an acknowledgment that this a porous space; some bad shit from outside might come in here. –Chris

> I also think it's good that we're starting to use 'safer' space rather than 'safe' space, because I think there is gradation of safety and unsafety. –Taylor

> Well, I think it's 'saf*er,*' not safe—even if all the volunteers do their best, we can't screen every person who comes in the space. So, I think there's a ceiling for how safe it can actually be. –Andy

One of the Collective Members routinely made a point of saying that safety cannot exist. Another volunteer related to this perspective:

> I think something I've learned from a Collective member … she doesn't believe that safety exists, and I never thought about it that way, but I'm really glad that she said that. I don't think it really exists, but the closest we can get to it is through respect, with different branches of that: respecting identities, respecting boundaries. –Adeline

Even if safety cannot be fully actualized, volunteers nevertheless expressed hopefulness for creating something better than the world as it currently stands. Rather than abandoning their ambitions, they opted to readjust their guiding metaphor and its corresponding language—from a "safe" space to a "safer" space. And as Solnit writes, "hope just means another world might be possible, not promise, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope" (2005: 5). As I demonstrate in the chapters to come, volunteers express this hope as an "ongoing series of defiance" (Solnit, 2005: 163), even while knowing that total safety can only ever exist as an imagination.

CONCLUSION

The project of Pocketbooks as a safer space is undoubtedly a utopian one, and to take actions towards prefiguring a micro-society free from structural violence is no small undertaking. Moreover, there is no blueprint for the community to draw from or emulate, because such a just society does not (yet) exist. Without this guidance, how can the Pocketbooks community translate their vision into action, into their space, into everyday

practice? What challenges do they face in creating a safer space in an unsafe world, what compromises are made along the way, and how can solidarity be formed across differences? How can justice be forged within the confines of a bookshop, and can such a small community truly create emancipatory possibilities?

INTERLUDE 4



Figure 6: The top three photos are taken from the street. On the left is decal lettering on the storefront window, which reads, "Rad books, $1 coffee, stimulating events, beautiful community" and next to this sign is an "A" hygiene rating. The middle photo depicts the sandwich board on the street with upcoming events, and on the right is the shopfront window with its street-facing books. The bottom two photos are book sections. On the left is "Feminisms," and on the right are two shelves which changed names during my fieldwork: "Violence Against Women" and "Women's Studies."

It is a Sunday morning just after the shop has opened, and I am heading to my second session of a discussion group, "Feminist Discussion of Masculinity." Outside Pocketbooks' front door, I browse the sandwich board on the sidewalk to get a feel for the week's upcoming events: Kundalini yoga; women, GNC (gender nonconforming), & trans self-defense workshop; Icarus Project mental health series; "off the binary"; radical

educators meet up; and “effective resistance” are some of the event names that have been handwritten in chalk. Peering through the shopfront—which is almost entirely glass and allows passersby to glimpse what is happening inside—I notice that there are more masculine-looking people in the shop than normal. I enter through the front door, which has “WE ARE A SAFER SPACE” written in decal lettering, and I hardly notice the “A” safety rating given to Pocketbooks’ café, a sign that has been tucked away on less visible window real estate.

Upon entering the bookshop, I wave to a friend behind the cashier counter. Above them hang tote bags for sale, which read, “Speak up, this isn’t a library!” and, “You are nothing without feminist art.” There is also a t-shirt that depicts an anarchist “A” reading a book, and another t-shirt that says, “All Cats are Beautiful,” depicting a giant cat triumphantly swatting a police car set ablaze (ACAB is an acronym for “all cops are bastards”). I quickly use the restroom, which is gender-neurtal and open to public use (including to non-paying passersby in need of a toilet), but is not yet wheelchair accessible. I then make my way to the discussion group, which is taking place in the café area of the shop—tucked away enough from people browsing books, but visible to those walking past outside.

Recently, there have been discussions about creating a “Masculinity” bookshelf. It is not the only bookshelf section up for debate, but it is the one that has caused the most friction within the community. Although the discussion group about feminist masculinity I am about to attend has only been established relatively recently, I make a note to myself that I have never heard anyone raise an issue with hosting this event despite having the same topic and name as the proposed bookshelf. Why should adding a new section on masculinity

be more controversial than hosting a discussion group on the same topic? I jot in my notebook that I should follow up on why bookshelf real estate has caused more uproar than this discussion group, and the convener begins our session.

Whenever women thinkers, especially advocates of feminism, speak about the widespread problem of male violence, folks are eager to stand up and make the point that most men are not violent. They refuse to acknowledge that masses of boys and men have been programmed from birth on to believe that at some point they must be violent, whether psychologically or physically, to prove that they are men.

— bell hooks, *The will to change: men, masculinity, and love*

CHAPTER 5 | FEMINISM, IT'S "ALL OVER THE WALLS": ON SPATIALIZING SAFETY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores how the Pocketbooks community spatializes safety in their endeavor to create an inclusive and intersectional site and to give rise to a feminist, subaltern counterpublic. By spatialize, I mean "to locate, both physically and conceptually, social relations and social practice in social space" as defined by Low (1996: 861). Section 1 explores spatial communicative technologies in addressing an imagined polity and what can be learned about the public Pocketbooks intend to address (and why) through negotiating, partitioning, occupying, and naming the bookshop space. Although much has been written about how the circulation of text and media can be used to address and therefore make a (counter)public, I challenge the tendency in the literature to reduce (counter)publics to linguistic communities primarily unified by their media consumption. Section 2 considers how the built environment is utilized to challenge sociospatial exclusions that marginalized people experience in public space and how architectural features can extend welcome in practical ways that communicative strategies alone cannot. Finally, Section 3 invites the notion of boundedness (or the lack thereof) into the conversation of spatializing an inclusive counterpublic. I consider how temporality and the porosity of spatial borders (or, we might say, its publicity—Pocketbooks' public-facing-ness) impacts the community's public address and emancipatory possibilities. In focusing on the spatiality of the shop, I shine a light on who the shop is for (both for whom it is intended and who actually comprises the

community); moreover, by unfolding the process of creating a counterpublic space, I help document alternative spatial orderings which can help us think creatively and practically about building just architectures in other contexts.

(1) PUBLIC ADDRESS AND SPATIAL COMMUNICATIVE TECHNOLOGIES

Warner emphasizes that a public exists "by virtue of being addressed" (2002a: 67). For the most part, Warner (2002a) suggests that modes of address are primarily text-based, be that print, audio, or visual, and that the circulation of these texts addresses an entity of strangers whose composition can never be completely known. While Hirschkind's (2006) ethnography of cassette tapes in Egypt is arguably the most well-known anthropology example that utilizes Warner's (2002a) counterpublic framework, more recently, Kanai (2017) has shown how women bloggers use GIFs with captions to create an "intimate public" (see Berlant, 2008) of girlfriendship, which allows readers to connect to other women who desire "but don't quite achieve, feminine normativity" (Kanai, 2017: 298). Regardless of whether the address is in print, images, or an oral medium, these publics are defined through their shared readership.

Despite Warner's influential literary approach to (counter)publics, questions have been raised about whether publics can be reduced to text and address alone, or whether factors like identity and "spaces of articulation" ought to feature into conceptualizations of what constitutes a public (Cody, 2011: 41). In Warner's writings, site-specific contexts—the very places where counterpublics might take root—are largely absent. But how might the materiality of a space give rise to a (counter)public? Blaustein (2004) asks:

> But if social space is conceived as an active materiality, rather than some prediscursive medium through which history moves and within which subjects are situated, if it is constituted by multidimensional discursive and nondiscursive networks of social relations, what productive roles might public art or urban planning, for example, play in Warner's alternative world-making project? (Blaustein, 2004: 179)

In a counterpublic space like Pocketbooks, Blaustein's question is particularly salient, and one that I engage in this chapter. Not only does Pocketbooks have a material site where participants congregate, but volunteers could hardly be said to be united in their shared reading of the shop's books (or at least, not exclusively so). I recall one of my Tuesday shifts, when another Staffer commented with a bemused chuckle that most of the volunteers had probably never read any of the books we carried. Out of context, this comment may sound like an insult, but we were simply remarking that most volunteers discovered the bookstore in pursuit of finding a community in the city; most of us were not drawn in by a desire to read the books per se, yet we somehow knew Pocketbooks was a place where we might find people with shared values, beliefs, and identities.[25]

Moreover, although the books we carried were by no means random (our book buyer curated them to reflect the community's commitment to intersectionality), there was no aim to *only* sell and circulate books that aligned with the shop's mission. As volunteers, we were repeatedly reminded that we could order any book a customer wanted within reason, whether it was something we carried or not. There was no moral or social principle that prohibited us from buying and selling books that may have clashed with our Pocketbooks' interpretation of feminism. I am reminded of a conversation with the book buyer about Lena

[25] I do not wish to give the impression that participants were not readers; indeed, many were very well-read and were enthusiastic about the shop's books. Nevertheless, what this comment speaks to is that we were not primarily united by our reading of these texts. Sure, participants did discuss them from time to time, but those conversations always seemed secondary to other types of book-related conversations, like where books should be shelved and which ones we should carry.

Dunham's (2014) book, *Not that kind of girl*. We agreed Pocketbooks should not stock the book, despite its popularity, because of Dunham's predisposition towards white feminism—an exclusionary kind of feminism that we did not want to associate with and certainly not actively promote. However, a customer once asked if we carried it, and although we did not, we told her we could always special order it for her. The book would not, however, make an appearance on Pocketbooks' shelves.

If the circulation of these texts was not the be all and end all in giving rise to a kind of (counter)public, how did those of us who identified with the Pocketbooks community know the bookshop was a place for us? As a starting point, I return to Warner (2002a), who reminds us that publics require preexisting forms of communication and shared sociality:

> A public seems to be self-organized by discourse but in fact requires preexisting forms and channels of circulation. It appears to be open to indefinite strangers but in face selects participants by criteria of shared social space (though not necessarily territorial space), habitus, topical concerns, intergeneric references, and circulating intelligible forms (including idiolects or speech genres). (Warner, 2002a: 106)

This first section explores how space—especially, but not exclusively, bookshelf space—can be used as a communicative technology to address and convene a public, and in the case of Pocketbooks, address those at the margins of society. I take "address" to mean a kind of call or cue to an imagined polity, as a signifier of membership and belonging to a particular public. In particular, I explore the politics of spatial inclusivity, and, drawing upon Soja (2009), consider how bookshelf arrangements act as spatial representations of justice; additionally, I consider how affective interpretations of spatial orderings can trigger feelings of belonging (or lack thereof) and can therefore influence the social makeup of Pocketbooks' counterpublic. In this interpretation, "address," is less about a literal reading

(or listening, watching, etc.), and more about spatial representation and interpretation; it is about "reading" the built environment.

Said has said that "none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography" (Said, 1993), and in a bookshop, geography is primarily constituted by bookshelves. Even though text plays a role in this mode of address (e.g., titles of bookshelves and the contents of the books, for example), I emphasize that it is primarily *the space attributed to various texts*—and the meanings communicated through spatial arrangements—that primarily constitute this mode of address. I use the phrase "bookshelf real estate"[26] as a metaphor to indicate the space that books occupy (or not), and to highlight the rights associated with occupying bookshelf space. Moreover, in using the term "real estate," I denote bookshelves as areas of spatial contestation, and like that land, are subject to change in ownership. I begin this section with a discussion about membership beyond readership before moving into a more detailed spatial analysis of the shop, in particular its bookshelves and front-facing politics.

(1.1) EXTERIOR SPACE AND ADDRESSING STRANGERS

That Pocketbooks is a feminist space is hard to miss before even entering the shop; communicative strategies for signaling its feminist ideology begin with the shop's exterior. The interlude preceding this chapter shared some of initial visuals one might be confronted with, my favorite of these being the bold, decal lettering that says, "We are a safer space" on

[26] This is a term I have created for the purposes of this chapter; it was not something used by my interlocuters.

the front door. Although it is true that this text can be read on its own, and a passerby can make some sense of it read as a singular line of text (especially those who might be familiar with safer spaces already), its spatial relationship to other text only amplifies its significance and the ways in which it may be perceived. Consider, for example, that all establishments that serve food in the city must post a sign with their hygiene rating (as given by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene) so that customers can make informed decisions about where they eat. Most restaurants are only too eager to place good ratings in the most prime location of their storefront in effort to attract customers. However, despite Pocketbooks having an "A" rating (the highest), the sign has been tucked in the side nook of the entryway, where it is easy to miss. Although the hygiene rating is a kind of safety assessment, its occupation of less visible window real estate, compared to the unmissable lettering about Pocketbooks being a safer space, communicates that food safety is not the priority; it is not these textual clues alone that communicate something about safety, but the spatial relationship between them.

Given that "reaching strangers is [a public's] primary orientation" (Warner, 2002a: 74), and a shopfront is the most publicly visible to strangers, the exterior of the shop is an effective communicative strategy, a kind of address to people who have never even been to the shop. Being able to communicate the community's ideology (or, at least, some aspects of its feminism) gives strangers an idea of the space behind the front door before they even choose to open it. One person, who became a volunteer, told me, "I come here knowing it's a safe space, which is reassuring. I'm aware that it's a feminist space, it's all over the walls."

Other exterior communicative strategies clarify Pocketbooks' claim to safer space—and to signal who is welcome. More decal lettering which says, "Crossing the line since

1999" and "Rad books, $1 coffee, stimulating events, beautiful community" quickly alert people to the shop's purpose as a community space and as one welcoming to those who might not want to spend a lot of money. Furthermore, shelves are attached to the storefront window; these shelves, however, are pointed not toward those inside the bookstore (who would only see the backs of books). Instead, titles are placed to face those *outside* of the shop—to catch the attention of potential strangers whose values might be aligned with Pocketbooks' mission. Titles like *Men explain things to me* by Rebecca Solnit, *Freedom is a constant struggle* by Angela Davis, and *Learning good consent* by Cindy Crabb, often made storefront window lineup, titles that efficiently communicate the community's feminist values. Although these ideological signifiers are "text" based inasmuch as they are located in book titles and decal lettering, the primary address is spatial; there is no circulation of text that gains the attraction of a potential readership, but a spatial arrangement that passersby can make sense of. The fact that the entire storefront is glass—and therefore people can see into the shop, especially the café area, which is backed up against the left front window—only helps to communicate to passersby that this is more than just a bookshop.

After spending a short period of time within the bookshop, people told me that they were able distinguish and contrast it from other radical bookshops or spaces which might feel distinctly "masculine." Compared to some other radical, subaltern counterpublics that might be more oriented towards "manarchists," as volunteers liked to call them (a term that is used as a dig against anarchist men who think they are politically radical but "take up space" in a typically misogynist way), one volunteer said of Pocketbooks:

> I visited this place… which is not an explicitly feminist anarchist bookstore in [another major American city], and it just felt much more like a man's space than Pocketbooks. [It was] more dimly lit—which is not entirely their fault, they just have less window space—they were selling t-shirts that had very aggressive slogans, and it just felt testosterone-

> manarchist, like a lot of big displays of vegan stuff and animal rights stuff, which is not inherently bad, but it makes me wary given its history of being sexist and racist, etc. And they just have a very small queer section, and I was like, it feels like was curated by a pile of white men…They had a lot of signs being like, 'Please don't steal, we donate our proceeds, we're a non-profit.' And this may be a legitimate problem you're facing, but I feel weird. That made me think more about the ways [Pocketbooks] doesn't do that. –Janet

In contrast, consider the comments of two women about their initial impressions of Pocketbooks:

> There's an atmosphere of openness and intimacy. –Isobel

> I just thought it feels like a pretty welcoming space to me, the aesthetic of the store does that really well. This was my impression even pre-volunteering. –Daisy

As Warner writes, a counterpublic is marked in that "ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene" (2002a: 120). I daresay the ACAB t-shirts, she-wees (devices for people without penises to urinate standing up), pronoun pins, and glaringly feminist book titles would have been off-putting to many—if not most—ordinary people outside the shop. But for the people I spoke to at Pocketbooks—who found comfort, intimacy, and belonging there—this materiality signaled that this bookshop (and by extension, community) was a place for them.

Warner writes that, "Strangers are less strange if you can trust them to read as you read…" (2002a: 15). That community members—volunteers, newcomers, and customers alike—similarly "read" this materiality suggests that they "are socially marked in their participation in this kind of discourse" (2002a: 120)—in the case of Pocketbooks, a feminist one. In other words, Pocketbooks' aesthetic taps into a feminist readership already in existence; the collectivity the shop appeals to is already united in their political values.

(1.2) THE SYMBOLIC VALUE OF BOOKSHELF REAL ESTATE AND THE POLITICS OF INCLUSIVITY: ON THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND LESBIANS IN AN INTERSECTIONAL SPACE

While spatial technologies can communicate feminist values and thus be "read" by strangers, these values—and their spatialization—are by no means fixed. Instead, they both create and are created by the Pocketbooks' community and are therefore subject not only to change but also to contestation. As this section shows, bookshelves acted as a kind of spatial battleground. While conversations often took shape about bookshelf "real estate," what lies beneath these conversations is a debate about the politics of inclusivity and membership in a feminist space (and feminist organizing more broadly). Bookshelves carry symbolic value and serve to recognize which groups are historically marginalized and subject to violence, as well as signify who merits justice; bookshelf real estate therefore acts like a type of metaphorical revanchism for subordinated groups to reclaim space—not just in society writ large but also within feminist movements. Counterpublic space, then, is not a neutral site that a counterpublic occupies; it is a dynamic site of contestation that makes and is made by that public.

That bookshelves carry symbolic value can be seen in the changing of shelf names. For example, when my fieldwork began, one of the first bookshelves customers would see upon entering the shop (apart from the Top Sellers) was "Violence Against Women." Although a phrase like "violence against women" may seem like a useful way to describe the structural violence of patriarchy, its emphasis on women renders invisible the violence suffered by trans and non-binary people, for instance, and fails to acknowledge the violence

that can be perpetrated by women; moreover, citing "women" has the potential to reinforce the gender binary (Frazer and Hutchings, 2020: 202). This title was seen by most volunteers as a spatial "hangover" from second-wave feminism, and throughout the first few months of my fieldwork, I regularly overheard volunteers express unease with the bookshelf title.

After a series of discussions with volunteers who voiced their concerns with the section title, the Collective announced that "Violence Against Women" would be renamed and relabeled to "Violence and Trauma," the justification given being, "Simply put, violence does not only happen to women." Crucially, the Collective emphasized in a joint email statement, "A more inclusive title we feel is, 'Violence and Trauma." The books that comprised these sections, however, remained relatively unchanged. Nevertheless, changing the name of the section acted as a means of reframing the conceptual boundaries of violence[27] and signified a more intersectional feminism, one that was more inclusive, as the Collective's statement highlighted. Bookshelves, then, were not seen as neutral spaces to hold books; dividing, occupying, and naming bookshelves constituted a symbolic, and therefore political, act.

Nevertheless, spatializing inclusivity is not a straightforward task because the politics of inclusivity are complex and subject to debate. Although almost everyone I spoke to was unanimously in support of the change to the "Violence Against Women" section, other sections were more contentious. For example, a customer browsing our shelves asked me if we had a "Lesbian" section. I told her that we did not, but we did have a "Queer Studies" section, where she would likely find the types of books she was after. She frowned

[27] Arguably, one of feminism's greatest accomplishments has been in to expand the conceptual boundaries of violence (see: Frazer and Hutchings, 2020).

and told me that she had already found what she was looking for, and then added, "But why do you not have a specific 'Lesbian' section? I think it's essential that you do." Another lesbian volunteer with whom I spoke expressed her frustration in reference to the erosion of lesbian spaces in the city and to the invisibility (and even growing stigmatization for potentially reinforcing the gender binary) of lesbians within the queer community. She said, "What spaces do women have left? Lesbians?" Addressing Pocketbooks specifically, she added, "Who haven't we included?"

The place of lesbians within feminist movements has been subject to discussion in the past few years as the "queer" umbrella has led to some lesbians feeling invisible or even forced to reject a "lesbian" identity in favor of a "queer" one. Morris (2016), for example, writes about "the disappearing L" in LGBT, and of the erasure of lesbian and women-only spaces and culture. Poignantly, when I spoke with someone from the Collective about why we did not have a section dedicated to lesbians, she said, "Well, if we had a 'Lesbian' section, we would also need a 'Bisexual' section, an 'Asexual' section…but "Queer" is inclusive and covers all of these identities. This way, we can encompass everybody." However, some identities that are recognized under the "queer" umbrella term *did* have their own sections. For example, there was a specific transgender section, because trans people have been historically excluded from both feminist and queer movements, and many mainstream branches of feminism still exclude transgender people, especially trans women. The acronym "TERF"—which stands for Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism—was not only an abbreviation used to describe a type of feminism at Pocketbooks, but one akin to a curse word. For these reasons, the community felt it was important to provide a section

exclusively for them—to clearly signal that Pocketbooks recognizes and supports trans rights and liberation.

Other volunteers I spoke to felt that attitudes like that of this customer were reductive and that people who insist that lesbians are being erased in queer organizing have too binary an understanding of the "L." One non-binary volunteer, Avery, said that people who accuse queer spaces of erasing lesbians fail to see non-binary and trans women as women, and do not see queer spaces as equivalent to women/lesbian spaces. Avery added that this attitude is an example of transphobia amongst LGB allies. Nevertheless, that this customer found the books she wanted on lesbian topics but nevertheless insisted on creating a section for lesbians suggests that the politics of inclusivity are represented spatially; it may even feel like an act of violence or betrayal when a space someone feels like should represent them is (possibly) contributing to their erasure. For others, like Avery, it can feel like a means of redressing violence within feminist movements.

(1.3) "MEN HAVE EVERY OTHER SPACE—WHY DO THEY NEED OURS?": ON MASCULINITY, CONTENTIOUS BOOKSHELVES, AND THE ROLE OF MEN

Even more contentious in the politics of inclusivity is what place—if any—men should occupy. One lesbian woman, already lamenting the loss of lesbian visibility, said, "The only people we haven't included yet are straight men, and I'll make a big fuss if we do!" Her comment was wrapped in sarcasm and said as though including straight men was such a far-fetched idea it would never happen. However, despite thinking her comment was hyperbolic, a few months after our conversation, a female volunteer proposed making a "Masculinity" section, which sent the community into feverish debate. What role should

groups who are historically associated with perpetrating violence have in a safer space, and how should their role(s) be represented spatially?

Almost everyone I spoke to was firmly against including a section on masculinity. One woman said to me, "Men have every other space. Why do they need ours?" Several other volunteers echoed the same sentiment. One male volunteer, who had been deeply involved with the shop for years, said (to paraphrase), "To be honest, I'm uncomfortable with the idea [of a masculinity section]. This space isn't for men, and I would feel weird about there being a section dedicated to us." This was echoed by another man who had also been volunteering for quite some time, "I just don't think we [men] should be taking up that much space," he said.

Pointedly, although most people I spoke to were firmly against including this section, not once did I hear someone take issue with selling books on masculinity or even ordering *more* books centered on this theme. To the contrary, volunteers went through Pocketbooks' stock list and singled out titles related to masculinity that could be compiled into a reading list on the subject; they also identified books the shop did not carry but might want to order. The idea was that by compiling a list of titles, volunteers would have a resource to give to customers who were hoping to unpack and engage with feminist readings of masculinity. Volunteers universally agreed that having this kind of resource was important because people who identify as men or masculine must also be part of the process of dismantling patriarchal institutions.

Additionally, despite making a connection between having a book section dedicated to masculinity and men having a place within the bookshop, men already *were* members of the community—even white, cisgender, and straight men. Admittedly, not everyone was on

board with the fact that men were allowed to volunteer, but most people were okay with it, as long as they were not in prominent roles in the shop's organizational structure, and if they took direction from more marginalized volunteers.

Nevertheless, occupying bookshelf space in this way was deemed qualitatively different than carrying books dedicated to masculinity or even allowing men to volunteer in the shop. The fact that one volunteer said, "I just don't think we [men] should be taking up that much space" suggests that taking up physical space is akin to extending *social* space—and therefore power—to these people. Moreover, given that bookshelf sections have been (re)named and divided to signify which groups have historically been marginalized and thus merit space (and justice), having material space explicitly designated for people who identify with masculinity was seen as acknowledging that men need space, too, something that almost everyone I spoke to was vehemently opposed to. While Pocketbooks bookshelves primarily acted as a means to symbolically reclaim space for subordinated groups, the masculinity section was perceived as building *in*justice into bookshelf geography. Cisgender men would also be more likely, volunteers worried, to read themselves as equal members as people of marginalized genders and backgrounds, rather than as guests in a space not intended for them.

Mysteriously, a masculinity shelf appeared one day (quite a small one with only a handful of books) without any announcement. Despite having roused volunteers only weeks before, the new section was not met with vocal objections; perhaps because the section was so small and tucked away from the main entry, it was deemed appropriately (and proportionately) sized. To an onlooker, it gave the impression that people who identify with masculinity have *some* role to play at Pocketbooks, but only a minor one.

Nevertheless, a volunteer, Taylor, told me that on their shift they printed a new label for the section, "Feminist Masculinity." They said, "Actually, a better title would be something with a verb, maybe, 'Deconstructing Masculinities,' but this will do for now." In changing the title, Taylor also changed the tone of the bookshelf's address—one that was not oriented to just any men or people identifying as masculine, but to people willing to confront and unpack the violence of masculinity. While these people may have not been historically marginalized groups, as Taylor told me, "At least this title sends a better message."[28]

(1.5) Black Lives Matter and addressing a Black public in a predominately white space

Address can also be understood in spatial exclusions—in shelves that are unoccupied, dormant, or eliminated. When I arrived for fieldwork, I learned that there had previously been a Black Lives Matter (BLM) section that was housed on one the of "cupcake" tables (the small tables usually reserved for monthly-rotating themes). Despite these tables changing themes and books regularly, BLM occupied the cupcake table for over a year. At some point in 2015, however, shortly before my fieldwork began, volunteers told me they showed up to the bookstore one day and the section had simply vanished. No one claimed responsibility for eliminating the section (perhaps no one wanted to be on the receiving end of outrage or did not want to take accountability for their decision), but

[28] Interestingly, I spoke to Taylor a few years after my fieldwork concluded, and they said that looking back, their opposition to a masculinity section was cissexist, because it equated masculinity with cis men and failed to recognize the importance of addressing masculinity, especially for transmasculine and/or non-binary people.

volunteers who noticed the absence were incensed. One person said to me, "How did they think it was okay to just get rid of it like that?" In defiance of the disappearing section, Skylar, a white volunteer, created a new section on the bookshelves (in a more permanent location—one of the shelves on the wall) dedicated to BLM and sent an email asking if any Black volunteers wanted to bottom-line the section, stating "do not respond to this if you are not black."

Sinna, a white volunteer I spoke to, was concerned that this anger was performative. Although Sinna acknowledged that white people like herself need to be aware of the dangers of dismantling a section on BLM—arguably, the single most important social movement for racial justice and safety of Black people in the country—she wondered if this anger was performative driven by guilt. She said simply, "This is definitely a predominately white space." Her comment was not a declaration that Pocketbooks *should* be a space for white people, but instead an observation that most volunteers, customers, and eventgoers *were* white. She elaborated, "Yes, even though we have books on police brutality, and we have books on Black issues, that does not mean we are a space for people of color." That the space was dominated by white people was only confirmed when no one came forward to bottom-line the new, more permanent BLM section that Skylar made.

Warner writes that "the idea of a public is motivating…it is constitutive of a social imaginary" (2002a: 12). This relationship to the imaginary is why some people (see Cody, 2011) have made a conceptual connection between a public and an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983). Viewed magnanimously,[29] the recreation of a new BLM section suggests

[29] One might argue this is a white perspective and/or one that excuses white supremacy.

that the Pocketbooks community imagines Black people as constitutive of its public; or, at the very least, the section represents the community's commitment to racial justice in the fight towards building a more just society.

However, if Sinna's analysis has merit, the BLM shelf was not so much a genuine address to a Black polity as it was a delusional imagination, even a performative act of white guilt. Do only white people imagine Black people as part of the community, or is this an imagination shared across racial boundaries? I share this tension not to make a final judgment (can a white person like me even make that call?) but to sit with this unease and to highlight that even though a group may appear to be addressed (the BLM section is quite large, for that matter), that does not mean that those people take up membership, or that they see themselves in this community. This recognition is not intended to erase the Black people who did partake in the community but to acknowledge the ways in which whiteness remained a prominent exclusionary feature of the space. My example of the BLM section serves as a caution not to make sense of a built environment alone; the community may still be exclusionary even if its architecture appears inclusive at first glance.

(2) BUILDING A MORE JUST ARCHITECTURE

Section 1 highlighted the ways in which space can be wielded as a communicative strategy to convey notions of violence, justice, and feminisms, and ultimately, to metaphorically represent for whom the community space is designated. Although this address influences peoples' impressions of for whom the space is for, how they see their identities being (de-or-re)prioritized in the community's endeavor for justice, and ultimately

shapes who takes up "readership" (or "membership"), this type of spatiality does not provide material inclusion per se. Bookshelves help to address a particular polity through spatial symbolism, but they do not—in the most literal sense of providing basic material needs—make the space more accessible to people. This section focuses on how the Pocketbooks community attempts to build a more just architecture by providing material access and physical space to people who are excluded from public spaces in the city due to structural barriers. In doing so, I shift the conversation beyond address alone to ways in which inclusion can quite literally—not just figuratively—be built into architecture.

(2.1) A PUBLIC TOILET

While a public toilet might seem like a basic architectural feature of any establishment, several volunteers suggested that having an accessible bathroom makes it *safe*:

> I feel like the good thing about this place—talking about safety—is that this has a nice, open door policy. It can be a refuge for anyone. The bathroom is open to the public! –Vera

> I think safe spaces can manifest in many ways. I think retail spaces that make commitments—public commitments—to making space for the marginalized, makes it a safe space. I think the Starbucks that lets people use the bathroom without question is in a way a safe space. Are they committing their whole space to being safe? No. But it's still something. –Ally

As Kowalski (2001) argues, as public space has become privatized to protect the needs of the most privileged people, space for those who are classed as "undesirable" has eroded, including public bathrooms. In the words of Lowe (2018), there is simply "no place to go." The city of New York has operated on the principle that public bathrooms are sites

for low-level crime and therefore need to be closed, and as a result, the city now has a public bathroom crisis. In 2020, there were only 1,103 public restrooms in the city, only two of which were open 24/7, despite the city having a population of 8.4 million (excluding the 63 million tourists per year, who also need toilets) (Chou, Gurley and Hong, 2020). Despite Mayor Bloomberg's promise in 2006 to install a meagre twenty automated public toilets across the city (Kirby, 2016), by 2020, only five have been installed (Walker, 2018). And yet the need for these bathrooms is plain. In 2015, 17,744 summonses for public urination were issued by the NYPD, and this number only represents those who were caught (Kirby, 2016). The lack of public toilets has become a way to further criminalize—and potentially incarcerate—unhoused people, or those who simply have no toilet nearby to use. Closing public toilets has a knock-on effect: it either prohibits peoples' movements (by keeping them close to where they live or to more neglected neighborhoods that the government does not care about) or leads to encounters with law enforcement. Closing public toilets, by serving to exclude and further marginalize subordinated populations, can thus be framed as an act of violence.

The desire to fence out "undesirables" is coded in places with bathrooms that are ostensibly open to the public but effectively are only quasi-public.[30] Civility, or respectability—qualities normally synonymous with whiteness or class privilege—may be the required price of entry. Consider Whole Foods, a high-end health food store, which is only a fifteen-minute walk or so from Pocketbooks. Although it once had a bathroom that

[30] Bathrooms have a history of exclusion. For example, public restrooms used to only be available to men, because women were expected to be at home; segregated toilets for "whites only" were a key feature of American racial segregation; and nowadays, they are at the forefront of anti-transphobic debates about whether transgender people should be able to use the bathroom that corresponds to their gender.

anyone could access, a coded lock now keeps people from freely accessing the bathroom. However, it is not a series of numbers that keeps would-be bathroom users out, but the socioeconomic privilege of shopping at a luxury grocery store. The code is not given freely; it can only be found on receipts.

Coded locks are not the only mechanism of exclusion or surveillance, however. Bloomingdale's, a luxury department store in Downtown Manhattan, has a bathroom for "public" use and does not require a code or receipts to gain access. However, Bloomingdale's came under scrutiny in 2013 when it was subpoenaed by the New York City Commission on Human Rights for racial profiling (Lockwood, 2013). Customers reported being followed, detained, or accused by workers based on unfounded suspicions of stealing. Since then, customers have reported similarly racist incidents in Bloomingdale's and other retail stores (Lampen, 2020; Rushe, 2014; Winsor and Ly, 2013); racial profiling is a widespread problem, not an isolated incident. While there is no physical lock to the bathroom at these other shops, socioeconomic, racial, and other structurally oppressive barriers—policed and surveilled by the workers— function similarly to the coded lock: to exclude people at the margins of society who are deemed as potential risk posers. This principle of illusory accessibility is similar to what Foucault has said of heterotopias, which presuppose "a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable," and that even though some places seem like "pure and simple openings," they may "hide curious exclusions" (Foucault, 1986: 27).

Although it would be an overstatement to suggest that Pocketbooks had no access barriers, its public toilet was championed for challenging these exclusions; the toilet was not simply a place to go but another feature of a more just architecture. As one volunteer said,

"People have the right to pee!" At Pocketbooks, the bathroom had no code or key needed for entry, was gender neutral, and had no one monitoring usage. The bathroom served many functions: physically providing somewhere to go in a gentrifying, increasingly expensive area where entry is often based on privilege; symbolically asserting that anyone should have access to a public toilet, not just the people who can afford to live in the area or access more elite quasi-public spaces; preventing people from being fined for public urination and therefore protecting unhoused people from potential criminalization; and rejecting the gender binary that most public toilets uphold. Volunteers added that having a public bathroom is a disabilities issue, too. People with invisible illnesses like Crohn's disease may require a toilet with no warning, but where do they go when public bathrooms are few and far between? What about pregnant people, those with children, and carers?

However, a point which volunteers frequently lamented was that the toilet was not accessible for wheelchair users (unless they were able to leave the wheelchair outside the restroom). The bathroom had been constructed by volunteers many years back, and at the time, there was not enough spatial capacity to make it wheelchair accessible (due to plumbing constraints, the bathroom is roughly the size of a broom cabinet—it is a tight squeeze even without a wheelchair). In recognition of this limitation, volunteers ensured that they could redirect wheelchair users to another place nearby that they could comfortably access. There was a Starbucks, of all places, only a few blocks away, with a wheelchair-accessible bathroom, and the café workers allowed people to use the toilet without making a purchase. The Collective repeatedly said that designing a wheelchair-accessible bathroom was a priority, but even if they could not directly provide an accessible restroom just yet, they could compensate by guiding people to other spaces when theirs fell short.

(2.2) CAFÉ AS PUBLIC SPACE

Much like bathrooms, coffeehouses, the "paradigmatic site" of Habermas' public sphere (Kohn, 2001: 509), are not freely accessible; in Habermas' cafes, "[a]ccessibility was regulated by two different mechanisms of class segregation: financial resources and conventional standards of appropriateness" (Kohn, 2001: 509-10). In Downtown Manhattan, which now bustles with trendy cafés that often function doubly as Instagram backdrops, it would not be out of place to see coffee going for $5 or more. In a bookstore nearby, which—like Pocketbooks, has an in-store café—a sign clearly marks in the seating area, "For paying customers" only. To challenge these mechanisms of exclusion, Pocketbooks not only allowed but actively encouraged people to sit in the café area (a handful of tables and chairs against the storefront window) without buying anything—and for as long as they wanted, too. If the person wanted something to drink, coffee was priced at $1 (and free for volunteers), and water was free.

Many volunteers said that Pocketbooks was one of the few places they could hang out without spending money in Manhattan; it acted as a public indoor space where they could simply "be," without which they might be forced to return home. High rent prices caused by rapid gentrification meant that most volunteers lived in Brooklyn or Queens (some of us lived even further out in the Bronx or even New Jersey) and would have to spend a significant amount of time (not to mention money) traveling between home and their workplaces. As such, they often had no resting place in Manhattan. One volunteer told me, "We come from all over the city, but we all make it here." The café area enabled people to have greater freedom of movement, something that would otherwise be dictated by the lack of publicly accessible space in Manhattan. Consider the following comments:

> If I'm meeting someone, it's an easy place to go and sit for however long you want and not feel pressured to do anything. And it was one of the few places I knew in the city that you can go and be for however long and not spend money. –Aja

> It's also really rad to have somewhere where I'm like, 'Oh, I have three hours to spend in Manhattan and don't want to go back to Brooklyn. Now I have somewhere I can go *and* get free coffee,' the free coffee being one of the perks of volunteering. –Ginny

Additionally, several people confided that having a space to simply be—without pressure to buy or consume—was especially important in Downtown Manhattan because there were few if any sober spaces in the city, especially in the evening (Pocketbooks is open until 11pm every day). One volunteer told me that she did not even realize she needed a sober space at first until she went to a local happy hour on one of her work breaks at her former job. She said:

> I had gotten caught one day at work having come back from a local happy hour, and they were not too pleased that I'd had a few drinks before coming to work. So, I was like, 'I need to find a sober activity on the [Lower East Side].' That was not easy. You can't go shopping—you're inevitably going to spend money… [I needed] something that was not centered around consumption... I suppose there is consumption happening at Pocketbooks, too, but when I went there, I remember Scully was the first one to ring me up, and I was like, 'Show me a book that I can't leave without.' And I explained I was on a break, and they were like, 'You can read it and not buy it,' and I was like, 'What?' And they were like, 'Yeah, if you are worried about spending money, don't buy it. Obviously don't take it, but you can read it here and it's fine.' I'd never had an interaction like that in a store before. Like ever.

Another volunteer told me that after her shift she would hang out in the café area until it closed because she knew she would not be tempted to use drugs:

> I'm a drug addict. Just being here was like literally one place where it felt like I didn't feel that need…. It's such an important place. Like I said, I would look forward to coming here, because I knew at least that one day of the week, most of my day, I would actually be able to commit myself to something else and would be able to get away from that.

Volunteers were not the only ones who made use of the café area; it attracted all sorts of people who were not typical customers or eventgoers (although they would also

often sit in the café, too), but people who simply had nowhere else to go. I am reminded of a woman who spent several hours on the phone with a domestic abuse line trying to find housing and legal assistance. With nowhere else private enough to make the call, the café area provided the safe space she needed. Another person who made frequent use of the café area was noticeably neuroatypical, unhoused, had visibly tattered clothes and hygiene that may have otherwise had him seen not-so-politely excused from other establishments for a lack of conventional respectability. He came to the shop most of my Tuesday shifts, and he had a habit of taking books of the shelves, piling them on a café table, and leaving them there. The books were not unaffected—they were often noticeably dirty and creased after he had handled them—and yet, we were assured by other volunteers not to worry about any damage to the books. The Collective member on shift made a habit of cleaning and re-shelving his books, but she said because he was not bothering anyone, there was no reason to take issue with his behaviors.

The primary importance of this café area was to provide physical space for people who might be excluded from other places, not to increase the shop's revenue. To call the Pocketbooks café a type of "public space" is not merely a claim that it is open to anyone, but to acknowledge that it actively challenges features and modes of respectability, surveillance, and exclusion that prevent other spaces in a gentrifying city from being accessible. As one volunteer said, "We don't have a place to sell books. We sell books to have a space." Books were secondary, the space—and for whom it could provide material access—was the priority.

(2.3) PARTICIPATION, "AUTHORSHIP," AND MEMBERSHIP

Although spatial communicative technologies and building a more just architecture were key components in addressing and generating an inclusive counterpublic, the *process* of spatializing the bookshop was just as important as any identifiable features of this new spatial ordering. As Soja writes, "Spatial (in)justice can be seen as both outcome and process, as geographies or distributional patterns that are in themselves just/unjust and as the process that produce these outcomes" (2009: 3). Several volunteers shared with me that actively participating in the place-and space-making at Pocketbooks gave them a sense purpose and empowerment. If we think of Warner's framework (of readership as membership) as a kind of metaphor, we can say that the people constituting Pocketbooks' counterpublic were not members through their "readership" (or even their use) of the space, but also in their "authorship." People at Pocketbooks did not only consume the space, but they also helped produce it, too.

Consider the following comment made by a volunteer, Susan, who spent her time measuring bookshelves and ensuring that they were wheelchair accessible; she also set up a used book corner. She said:

> Janice encouraged me in the first few shifts, and that was really important to me. I was really drawn to visually organizing the space. I've had pretty bad experiences with psychiatry and stigma about my neurodiversity and I felt really self-conscious about the fact that I wanted to do that, and how much space I was taking up in organizing things. And by that, I mean literally changing the space visually, according to what I thought was a good thing to do. And I was visibly nervous about it and asking, 'Janice, is it okay? Am I weird? Do you think I'm a freak?' I didn't say that, but I communicated it. And they were really encouraging and affirming that it was a really good thing I was doing and just not seeing me in this ableist way. And that was pretty formative for me in feeling comfortable with who I am in the space, and taking on work in the space, I think. This is something that I cite a lot during safer spaces conversations…. we need to be encouraging each other. –Susan

Although Susan helped expand the shop's accessibility by ensuring that the space between bookshelves could accommodate wheelchair users, what is noteworthy about her comment is the connection she made between actively transforming the space and feeling more empowered on a personal level. Being hands-on in Pocketbooks not only allowed her to spatialize inclusivity for other people, but the process also helped heal some of the trauma and invalidation she had experienced as a neurodivergent person. In her words, the experience was formative for "feeling comfortable with who [she is] in the space"; it was not the existing layout, books on gender/sexuality/disability, the café, or any architectural feature per se, but her personal experience in *making* the place—of being an author of the landscape, not just a reader or occupant of it.

The sentiment Susan expressed was echoed by other volunteers, who were eager to share with me their individual roles in producing the space:

> I set up events every Friday…. It's a fun thing to rearrange the store and make sure everyone's comfortable. Two weeks ago, we had a movie screening and there were problems with the sound, so we had to do a wire maze[31] in order to get it to the counter. I stayed for that entire event and mini movie. One of the things we do is mini art projects—oh, like the Halloween art above your head!! All of the signs and stuff like that, we made. –Molly

> I set up the 'blind date with a book' table and game corner! Come look! –Jax

> Events make me feel more important, just organizing stuff and helping out a lot. I like to be around people, network, make sure this happens, make sure that happens. –Jason

> I feel welcomed. I think it feels fun to help out and be part of something. I remember doing the pull sheets[32] on my first day, which was oddly comforting. –Tully

[31] The "wire maze" Molly refers to is the intricate overlapping of wires and cords needed for events that require a projector, microphone, etc.
[32] Pull sheets are inventory lists. Volunteers would check the shelved books against pull sheets to verify if the inventory lists were up to date.

Encouraging volunteers to actively participate in the making of the shop was more important than ensuring maximum efficiency. One area of the bookstore was bottom-lined by a volunteer, Zelda, who was not only neuroatypical, but also transgender and queer. At one point, a group of volunteers discussed turning this area into a more group project rather than something for a single person to oversee, because not infrequently, there were issues that would arise because of Zelda's occasional poor planning. However, volunteers came to realize that the importance of this role for Zelda outweighed any potential benefits of increasing efficiency, so the idea of transforming her role into a working group was dropped. There was an unspoken understanding that gatekeeping is not confined to a person's ability to access establishments but also to their ability to participate in their construction; therefore, the aim is not necessarily to create the best well-oiled capitalist machine, but to encourage people to participate, especially those who elsewhere suffer stigmatization.

Not only does participating in the process of space-and place-making empower volunteers, so too does it transform the space around them in unique ways; their individualities are embodied in the spatial arrangements of the shop. For example, on shift, one of the volunteers, Bella, pulled out a new title, *Frientimacy: how to deepen friendships for lifelong health and happiness*, by Shasta Nelson (2016). Alix, another volunteer, chimed in, "Well, as someone who is aromantic, I think it would be really cool if it were in the 'Sex & Relationships' section," they said. Without questioning, Bella added the appropriate label to the database and Alix shelved the book to the 'Sex and Relationships' section. What is significant is not only how this location might change the way someone reads the book, but

how Alix's individuality became embodied in the spatiality of the shop. As one volunteer added:

> When no one's the commander telling people what to do, everything is much more relaxed, and you have to take initiative and decide what's okay. Like when I was learning where all the books go, and it was like, 'You can kinda decide which one goes in the front.' And I was like 'Who should I ask which one's okay? So that's interesting. Everyone puts in their own individuality into it.

By making decisions about the space around them, volunteers were able to see themselves—quite literally—reflected in the space around them. Therefore, it is not only identifiably "accessible" features of the architecture (like a café and public bathroom), nor any kind of spatial communicative strategies (like book sections or decal lettering) that fostered feelings of belonging and inclusion, but this active participation of creating and altering space—especially by those who are often excluded and prevented from making these decisions elsewhere.[33] Membership can also be forged through spatial participation. And much like the community itself, which is constantly in flux, the space itself is always being (re)made, too.

[33] Participation is also something that Harvey (Harvey, 2008, 2012, 2003) emphasizes in his interpretation of Lefebvre's (1968) notion of the "right to the city." Harvey writes, "The right to the city, therefore, far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart's desire…. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights" (Harvey, 2008). In altering the bookshelf, participants enacted this "right to the city."

(3) BOUNDEDNESS: ON TEMPORALITY AND BORDERS

Although the phrase "safer space" might insinuate that the bookshop is a physically enclosed entity, and even though volunteers made reference to "out there" when distinguishing the shop from the world around it, the borders of the bookstore are permeable (in fact, this is partially why volunteers prefer the "saf*er*" space designation despite resorting to more binary "in here" / "out there" language sometimes). Like any other space, it is not fully cordoned off; moreover, addressing strangers—people outside the space itself—is built into the enterprise of creating a counterpublic. Despite volunteers being intentional in their efforts to spatialize the bookstore as inclusive and safe, the shop's public-facing-ness (or, "publicity") meant that there was always an unpredictable, uncontrollable element to the shop's materiality. No matter how much planning volunteers put into the built environment, unexpected (and sometimes unwelcome) people and objects would make an appearance. Additionally, like any other space, Pocketbooks is not bounded in time; therefore, on a weekly, daily, even hourly basis, the shop would change in some way—from the music played, to the volunteers on shift, to the event, to which books faced out, and so on.

But to what extent is the bookshop a "safer space" when its physical and temporal boundaries are not bounded? This section considers the spatio-temporal boundedness (or lack thereof) of Pocketbooks and how the porosity of these borders not only created tensions in creating an inclusive counterpublic space, but also afforded new opportunities to include more people into its community and even rethink what constitutes safe architecture.

(3.1) TEMPORALITY AS STRATEGY: SPACES WITHIN THE SPACE

While it is true that most spaces cannot be neatly time-stamped (no spatial entity is frozen in time, after all), what differentiates Pocketbooks from other spaces is that temporality was enacted as a *strategy.* Given the shop's architectural and real estate limitations—and with the acknowledgment that these limitations make it difficult to include everyone—temporality was wielded as a tool for creating a more inclusive space. Although I have already discussed the bookshelves in depth, what I have yet to disclose is that—barring the bookshelves that were bolted to the walls—these shelves were set on wheels. By having the shelves mobile, volunteers could wheel them to the sides of the shop, thereby generating space for events and potentially new audiences. In place of the bookshelves, chairs would be arranged for eventgoers—perhaps in rows, in the case of a speaker event, or in a circle for a discussion-based event (in which case, the circle would likely be off to the side and cordoned off by the wheeled bookshelves, rather than front and center of the shop for everyone to tune in). By opening up the shop spatially, Pocketbooks invited new people and conversations into the space, as well as platformed identities and subjects that might not otherwise be "front and center" on the bookshelves.

For example, although there was no "Lesbian" section on the shelves, Pocketbooks regularly held a "dyke knitting group," an event that has been running since the shop first opened. The reasoning behind having an identity-based group is the same that underscores the premise of any counterpublic: that more marginalized people might find it beneficial to create a public of their own. After all, even though someone might belong to the wider Pocketbooks community, they may have more specific identities that are not shared with other members of that public; this multiplicity of belonging is something Warner alluded to

when he said that "the publics among which we steer, or surf, are potentially infinite in number" (2002a: 9). Moreover, even a counterpublic may have a more "dominant" public within that group (which, at Pocketbooks, tended to be white, educated, women, and/or queer). These temporary spaces (which only lasted for the duration of the meeting or activity) helped foster community centered around a more particular identity. Although they might not have fully made up for the lack of fixed, bookshelf space, these groups nevertheless helped acknowledge the specific needs of various sub-communities. There was also a mixer for polyamorous people, a regular discussion group for people who were neuroatypical, and a transgender meetup, to name a few more examples. Given that these groups were often devoted to the most marginalized people within the community, they acted as temporary counterpublic spaces within the greater Pocketbooks counterpublic space; in a way they functioned as "micro" counterpublic spaces.

In addition, these temporary spaces provided an opportunity for "guests" to participate in the space, like as white, straight, cisgender men. The Feminist Discussion of Masculinity group, for example, met in the café area and was one of the events when masculinity was at the forefront of community discussions. While holding more permanent space (e.g., bookshelf real estate) for historically privileged groups was perceived by many as wrong, offering space *temporarily*—space that can be quickly assembled and disbanded—was deemed a more viable option for including people who might not be fully embraced as community members but nevertheless might benefit from engaging with (and learning from) others in the shop. The Feminist Discussion of Masculinity group, as I have said, was not only relatively uncontentious but broadly acknowledged as worthwhile.

(3.2) OVERCOMING CONFLICTING NEEDS

Much like Warner has acknowledged that "there is no infinitely accessible language" (2002a: 107), there is also no universally accessible space that can accommodate everyone's needs. Not only does the category of "marginalized" contain a multitude of identities that may need more private socializing and regrouping, but people who share identities may still have different requirements and desires. This tension surfaced during a speaker-based event where an author read several excerpts from her memoir, some of which included depictions of her sexual experiences in semi-graphic detail. The author's memoir was intended to be lighthearted, and indeed, I noticed more enthusiasm and laughs in the audience than usual; it was obvious that having the floor to safely discuss her sex life created a sense of camaraderie amongst the other listeners, most of whom were women.

As both a sex positive and survivor-centric space, Pocketbooks also aims to include people who might be sensitive to descriptions and discussions about sex, not only those who need a safe space to explore their sexuality. What might be sexually empowering for some people, then, might be traumatic for others. This tension surfaced when one of the volunteers on my shift, Kaia, looked flustered only moments after the author began describing one of her sexual experiences. Kaia swiftly told me and another volunteer that they needed to leave the shop immediately. Promptly and without question, the three of us left Pocketbooks, went for a walk, and got some ice cream (a few other volunteers agreed to hold down the shift in our absence). Although saddened to learn about Kaia's experiences, I was not surprised when Kaia told us that they had experienced multiple incidents of sexual violence and that these kinds of discussions induced paralyzing flashbacks. Needless to say, although the event provided a space where other people could find a sense of bonding through sharing

sexual experiences, for Kaia, it was not only alienating but so traumatic it prompted her to leave the space until the event ended.

It might be tempting to conclude that Pocketbooks cannot be inclusive for everyone, but a temporal perspective presents another way of framing inclusivity. Even though Kaia did not want to be in Pocketbooks during the event because it resurfaced gender-based trauma, Kaia was Pocketbooks' event coordinator and had personally booked the event. They, like the rest of us, believed that these kinds of events merited space at Pocketbooks because they provided an opportunity to validate people who might be sexually disempowered due to gender-based discrimination. Because events like these were potentially triggering for many people, they did not occur on a daily basis (in fact, events like this one were not particularly common), but they had an important place in the events lineup nonetheless. Inevitably, some temporal-spatial iterations of the shop would include people at the "expense" of other members of the public it wished to include; this "exclusion," however, was seen as necessary to create a space that ultimately, could be *more* inclusive when viewed temporally. This is not to say that Pocketbooks ever did achieve complete inclusivity—a point that I reiterate throughout this dissertation—but it would be a copout to argue that Pocketbooks could not act as both a sex positive and survivor-centric space (or embody any other seemingly "conflicting" values). Sexually explicit language and discussions had their place within Pocketbooks, just not at all times.

(3.3) LIMITATIONS OF TEMPORALITY AS STRATEGY

Despite the possibilities afforded by temporary spaces to create a more inclusive address, participants acknowledged that including and prioritizing people of color remained a significant problem. One volunteer, Zia, who felt like racism was not properly being addressed within the community, organized a discussion group to give conversational space to her and other volunteers of color to discuss experiences of racism within Pocketbooks and how they might go about contesting the shop's whiteness. The event, however, was publicized as open to anyone wanting to discuss the community's shortcomings. Seth, who helped organize and facilitated the vent, told me:

> …We called it a safer spaces meeting. And what I really wanted was anyone can air grievance—white, brown, whatever—and then we'll move on to the next point, and we'll record these grievances and address them at the next… But it ended up being a few customers who were people of color, a couple of volunteers who were people of color, and very few Black people showed up (and that was an issue in the past, too)… –Seth

The event ended up being dominated by white speakers airing their grievances about hierarchy within the space between Collective members and volunteers. Because of how the conversation devolved, the organizer of the event, disheartened, concluded that it was impossible to create a separate group to address issues of race and racism, become even *those* spaces would be taken over by the more privileged and dominant members of Pocketbooks (namely, white people). Seth said, "Zia just didn't say a word, she was so frustrated. I didn't know what to do…and Molly, [another volunteer of color], was like 'I feel so traumatized by these queer white women speaking over me.'" The event only reinforced the issue the original organizers were trying to raise—that white people were occupying more space than they ought to, usually at the expense of people of color.

Learning from this experience, Seth said, “After that meeting, I was like, it sounds like we need a separate meeting for people of color only.” Although more race-based discussion groups were planned after this “total disaster,” as Seth called it, and were made more explicit that they were only for people of color, the experience left the original organizer dejected; she no longer wanted a role in organizing these discussions. I raise this example to emphasize that although spatio-temporal tools can be utilized to broaden inclusivity, they cannot necessarily *undo* structures of power that persist in the bookshop. Sometimes they may even (re)produce the power differentials the sub-group wished to challenge in the first place.

(3.5) UNEXPECTED AND DANGEROUS: ON PEOPLE, OBJECTS, AND RETHINKING SAFE ARCHITECTURE

The politics of (in)visibility have always been tricky for vulnerable communities who need to balance safety with visibility (see: Adams, 2010; Jones, 2020). Some queer communities have even adopted invisibility as a strategy for resistance (Stella, 2012). One might be assumed, then, that a safer space like Pocketbooks must make every effort to attract only those who are politically aligned with the shop’s mission (or, at least, curious and respectful), otherwise, the safety that has been so intentionally curated might be jeopardized.

Although people at Pocketbooks sometimes felt vulnerable in these moments, I found that, through juxtaposition with those who participants collectively perceived as “Other,” they also provided opportunities to deepen a sense community bonding. This dawned on me during one of my shifts when two athletic, white men in business suits

entered the shop. Although Wall Street-looking men might not draw attention in most public spaces in New York, their tailored suits and briefcases drew the attention of those of us who were in the shop; their dress, stature, and movement embodied capitalism and masculinity at their finest (not something one saw often at Pocketbooks). Without making any significant motion, those of us in the shop glanced sideways at one another, our faces expressing the same question, "What do they want?" I was unsure if they wanted to sell us something, if they had an bone to pick, or if they were some religious organization coming to evangelize, but one thing was clear to all of us: they did not *belong* here.

The men approached the register and asked for the manager. This question alone was enough to make us all stifle a laugh (technically, there are no managers, and anyone asking for one obviously does not know what Pocketbooks stands for). Ironically, a Collective member *was* on shift; while she was not technically a manager, she did have her name on the lease, held a significant amount of social capital, and was also the book-buyer. Adorned in one of her ACAB[34] shirts (the collar had been cut and torn to hang off her shoulders), she responded coolly, "There is no boss here."

As it turns out, these men were trying to sell us on a new Internet provider, but when they realized we were not interested, they swiftly left the shop. Almost instantaneously upon their exit, the tension amongst the rest of us broke, and we all started laughing; we made jokes about how they looked so out of place, how the Collective member toyed with them (people repeated with glee, "There is no boss here!"), and so on.[35] Even though the presence

[34] ACAB stands for "all cops are bastards." Her shirt read, "ACAB, all cats are beautiful"—something that would be read with a wink to those in the know of the acronym, especially because it depicted a giant cat clawing a police car and setting it ablaze.

[35] One volunteer I spoke to after concluding my fieldwork said that one of the best ways that the store subverted power structures expected from "the outside," like stopping entitled "Karens" in their tracks and saying, "You have no power here."

of "Others" initially provided us with a sense of unease and vulnerability, we knew that *we* were all on the same side and had each other's backs. It reminded me of what Chrissy had said about the Village. Even though she did not know who might be around to gay bash, she knew the neighborhood was a place for *her*, and ultimately, the social rules were there to protect her and her dignity. We knew this to be true at Pocketbooks, too; it was *our* space, and these men were the outsiders, even if their presence initially put us on guard. Spatializing the shop as a safer space, then, was not as simple as fencing out undesirable people (or potential "risk posers")—indeed, such a task would be near impossible anyway)—but fostering a sense of belonging amongst those for whom the space is for, a feeling not necessarily disrupted by outsiders, but forged in recognition of the community's insider status.

Another thing that has been said about counterpublics is that they draw power from their publicity. Fraser (1990) attributes the success of bringing domestic violence into public concern and as a "topic of public discourse" to the subaltern feminist counterpublic; it made domestic violence a point of common concern rather (1990: 71). While Fraser's (1990) observation holds true at Pocketbooks, her point can be expanded upon: there is a *bi*directional emancipatory relationship between a counterpublic space and other publics. I conclude with an example of how the appearance of an unexpected and potentially dangerous object at Pocketbooks provided opportunity for the community to rethink harm reduction and just geographies—and how the *entry* of material objects can afford liberatory potentials, not only the "exportation" of ideas and values from the counterpublic to dominant publics.

As I mentioned previously, having a bathroom open to the public is deeply entwined with Pocketbooks' mission. However, in supporting those with drug addiction, Pocketbooks unintentionally opens the space to the possibility of drug-related items and visibly intoxicated people—something that could jeopardize the shop's sobriety (a quality that so many volunteers value dearly). These two facets of Pocketbooks collided when it was brought to volunteers' attention that used syringes had been found in the bathroom.

Had Pocketbooks acted in accordance with Giuliani's broken windows philosophy (see Chapter 3), the response would have been to discard the syringes, close the bathroom from the public, and expel the perpetrator from the shop. After all, low-level crimes like drug usage have been used by the city's police force to (re)claim public space and/or to incarcerate those who use drugs or engage in other minor offenses, as I illustrated in previous chapters. But at Pocketbooks, the response was not to criminalize or even penalize the person (even though volunteers and Collective members were aware of who had left behind the syringe), nor to close the bathroom to prevent more "incivilities," but to compassionately engage in conversations about how they can better support people with addiction while also maintaining a space safe for everyone else.

Recognizing the urgency in addressing both drug use and maintaining a safe bathroom space, a volunteer booked an event (advertised as part of a "Safer Space Training" workshop initiative) in partnership with volunteers from local harm reduction center, who were also self-identifying (recovered) addicts. As a group, we identified several potential "threats" to the community if we were to take no action: discarded syringes could spread viruses like Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, and HIV (should someone find and reuse one), seeing a syringe could trigger a traumatic response (especially for those who might be trying to

abstain from drug use), doing nothing could result in people overdosing in the bathroom (and potentially lead to no other option but to call the police, which was always a last resort), and the bathroom could become a place where people knew they could use drugs (making it no longer feel like a safer space for those on a sobriety journey, especially).

Collectively, we agreed that there was no straightforward solution, but one option we discussed was placing a biomedical sharps box in the bathroom where people could safely dispose of used syringes. We considered but made no conclusions regarding the following questions: Would bringing in a sharps box invite people to use drugs in the store and symbolically suggest that the bathroom is a place to take drugs? Or, on the other hand, would a sharps box allow us to mitigate existing harm within the shop whilst remaining accessible to the public and compassionate towards all people, including drug users?

Most people were cautiously in favor of introducing a sharps box, but the decision was made by the Collective to hold off for the time being. Closing the bathroom permanently was never seriously considered, although we did discuss the possibility of having a key so we could keep time of bathroom usage; however, this option was deemed too similar to surveillance and violent gatekeeping. A few months later, shortly after my fieldwork ended, the Collective decided to place a sharps box in the bathroom because more syringes had been found, and by that point, they had come around to the idea that unsafely disposed syringes were more dangerous than introducing a bin to dispose of them.

Additionally, those of us who attended the workshop received Narcan training. Narcan is a brand name for naloxone, a medication that blocks the effects of opioids and can be used in case of overdose, either by nasal spray or needle injection. We realized that most volunteers were not trained to respond to opioid overdose (even though opioid use is

common in the neighborhood), and in the case of an emergency, we would have no way to deal with it, apart from calling 911—something viewed a last resort because of how the police and legal system treats drug users, particularly people of color. Training ourselves to use Narcan enabled us to provide harm reduction services outside of mainstream institutions, expanded the physical locations where compassionate and non-legal approaches to drug could take place (not just at the Harm Reduction Center), and ensured that volunteers had a more confidence in handling these situations. In doing so, we helped expand the safe landscape for drug users in Manhattan, providing yet another space that would include, not criminalize—and help, not report—those who struggled with drug use. In other words, we contributed to cultivating a more just geography across the city.

The syringe incident highlights that Pocketbooks' strategy is not as simple as excluding or expelling unwanted or unexpected objects, even if community members might perceive them as dangerous; this approach is in stark contrast to policing strategies elsewhere in the city that seek to minimize risk by eliminating those deemed "threatening." Instead, unexpected and even dangerous objects encouraged reflexivity amongst community members and helped generate radical discussions about alternative ways of spatializing the bookshop—alternative not only from dominant public spaces, but also from Pocketbook's own counterpublic space. The porosity of Pocketbooks' borders, then, afforded opportunities to reflect on the shortcomings of the space and to brainstorm new, potentially more just architectural arrangements.

This is not to say that this reflexivity ends in the bookstore, though. I can attest that even in life away from fieldwork, these conversations have enabled me to introduce ideas I learned at Pocketbooks into other communities I belong to, as well. In one of my Junior

Dean[36] supervisions at the University of Oxford, someone at another college raised concerns about student drug use; in response, I mentioned the possibility of naloxone training. It was something the other Junior Deans had no previous knowledge of. "Intrusive" objects, afforded by Pocketbooks' publicity, not only paved way for the Pocketbooks community to reflect on creating more just architectures, but in training and shaping those of us who worked there—who would eventually be in other spaces—paved the way to bring these ideas into other publics, too.

CONCLUSION

To spatialize safety is not to create a blueprint for a more inclusive, just architecture (although the process may generate more accessible spatial arrangements that *could* be adopted elsewhere), nor is it to fence out all people and objects the community deems violent or dangerous. Instead, it is a reflexive process of (re)negotiating who is most marginalized within society and feminist movements, debating how justice should (or could) be spatialized, and encouraging historically marginalized people to participate in the making of their built environment(s). While feminism is "all over the walls," as one participant told me, who is to say those walls will not one day be repainted or torn down as the community's priorities and understandings of (spatial) violence evolve? Given that changeability is inherent to (re)making of a safer space, the "safer space" metaphor cannot be said to describe a fixed spatial (or social) entity but one that is constantly in flux. How the space

[36] Junior Deans are postgraduates hired by colleges at the University Oxford to assist in student-related welfare and/or decanal issues.

changes—and how the people who make and occupy that space change, too—is subject to the ways in which feminist discourse on violence evolves, to individual personality traits and preferences, to times of day, and even to unexpected encounters.

Occupying space enables new possibilities. Already I have hinted at some of these opportunities—like the ability to simply "be," have a say in their community, engage in reflexive and creative thinking, and regain confidence. I now turn to the social life afforded by this counterpublic space, to the discursive space that challenges the lack of participatory parity in dominant publics.

INTERLUDE 5



Figure 7: On the left is a cupcake table (a small table with a monthly theme), with a sign that reads "Afro futurism." In the middle is a game called "The Resistance" next to felt nipples for sale (only one remains); below is a pipe-cleaner butterfly with a note that reads, "You are important," hanging behind the volunteer counter (I made this on shift one afternoon when a few volunteers and I decided to decorate the shop). On the right are some of the pins for sale, which read "My body my rules" and "ze/hir" (pronouns).

Taylor: Rach, you've got to read *Annihilation*.

Me: *Annihilation*?

Taylor: Yeah, haven't you seen the book that everyone's been passing around?

Me: Oh! Is that that the sci-fi book with the X on the cover and no title? I was wondering what that was."

Taylor: That's the one.

Me: Well, what's it about?

Taylor shoves a copy in my hands a bit too enthusiastically and tells me it's "really, really weird" and "can't be described because it's more about the tone than anything," but adds that it falls under the umbrella of "eco-horror." Taylor and I have been hanging out more lately; we recently attended a reading group in Brooklyn together for *Jacobin*, an American quarterly magazine that writes from a socialist perspective, where we unexpectedly ran into another Pocketbooks Collective member.

Like me, Taylor is a PhD student, which is probably why we've bonded so much lately. They're quite critical of academia, especially of the idea that people can "own" knowledge, and they're debating leaving their PhD program altogether. Taylor grew up in New Jersey and does not like speaking about their family; they were supportive enough but lean conservative, and Taylor finds them exhausting at the best of times. They became introduced to radical politics in university and began reading books on socialism and anarchism in their early twenties. Now they cannot imagine life any other way. They also work in a bike collective, and they lead "know your rights" trainings. Taylor has an invisible illness that they rarely disclose, but they nevertheless consider themselves disabled and find it difficult sometimes because people read them as able-bodied. Additionally, although Taylor is often read as a man, they have recently been questioning their gender identity and have asked us to use they/them pronouns; however, they have asked us to use he/him pronouns when outside Pocketbooks, because they are not ready for others to know that they

do not identify as cisgender. One evening at a bar with our friend Sandra, Taylor asks if they can consider themselves "queer."

Taylor: The thing is, I'm only attracted to femmes. So, I'm not sure if it would be wrong to call myself "queer." I don't want to co-opt an identity, y'know?

Sandra: But you're not a cis man! So, any attraction you experience is, by definition, not straight. If "queer" feels right to you, use it.

Despite her conviction, Sandra has also recently been questioning what her queer identity means to her. Although she feels attracted to all genders, she no longer wants to date men. Not only does she tend to find them "less interesting," but politically, she thinks it's wrong to date men if she has a viable choice to date people of other genders. However, she recently had an interaction with a man who made her rethink her decision.

Sandra: So, the thing is, this guy told me he liked my outfit. I was wearing baggy cargo shorts and an old-ugly t-shirt, and I was very obviously queer signaling with my fashion choices. I was about to roll my eyes at the dude, and I noticed he had the same outfit on as me! So, the whole thing felt very queer. It seemed more like he was into our lack of gender conformity. I think I might be up for dating men as long as our relationship still feels queer.

Like me, Sandra previously studied anthropology, and she is hoping to work in sex education. She wants to rewrite curricula to include sexual pleasure, affirmative consent,

queer sex, and sex with disabilities. For the time being, she now works in a bakery. A few years ago, Sandra became interested in tarot, and a few months back, she started attending feminist witchcraft groups in Brooklyn. She tells me that she needs to be careful with the feminism/witchcraft overlap, though, because "there can be a lot of second-wavey vibes sometimes and definitely some TERFS" (trans-exclusionary radical feminists). Sandra is passionate about de-sexualizing female bodies, and she says that she and her housemates have started going topless at home in attempt to normalize female nudity. Although she found it a little awkward at first, she now feels stranger when wearing a top. When I tell her that I would like to stop wearing a bra ("boob prisons," she calls them) but that I'm worried about the looks and comments I'll inevitably receive (not that I don't get them anyway), she suggests that I wear a bra on my commute to and from Pocketbooks, but that I remove it in the bathroom once I get to the shop. I take her suggestion the following day, and despite spending much of my shift with arms folded to hide my chest, I find myself doing so less over the following weeks.

We were neither what we had been nor what we would become once we reached our destination.

— Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation*

CHAPTER 6 | "TAKE UP SPACE": THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF SAFE(R) SOCIABILITY AND (ANTI)VIOLENCE DISCOURSE

> The stories that underlie the [safe space] metaphor are not stories about intellectual challenge and personal growth….When everyone's voice is accepted, and no one's voice can be criticized, then no one can grow. The tendency to censor critical reflection turns sympathy into sentimentality, open-mindedness into empty-headedness. (Boostrom, 1990: 407)

> For me it's a bit fraught, it's uncomfortable. I'm challenging myself… In my view, it's a good thing, it means you're thinking about things, you're trying to evaluate subconscious behavior that you may be a blind spot that you may not be aware of. For me, the reason I take [notes] is because there's the obvious misogyny that exists in the world and then there's the stuff that exists beneath the surface that isn't obvious, that's objectifying. It's been an interesting critical trip to go through all of that. For me it's been invaluable.
>
> –Mike, a cisgender, heterosexual, white man who attends the Feminist Discussion of Masculinity group at Pocketbooks

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to miss headlines about the "snowflake generation," political correctness gone too far ("PC culture"), and the potential threat that safe spaces pose to free speech.

While counterpublics are lauded for their ability to contest dominant discourses and social practices, safe spaces tend to be reduced to a set of rules (most infamously, giving trigger warnings[37]) without much consideration of the processes by which new behavioral or linguistic conventions come to fruition, the ideologies that motivate their implementation, and how they are negotiated and experienced by those who practice them.

This chapter shines a light on the alternative social and linguistic practices created and implemented at Pocketbooks. Rather than viewing these practices in contextual isolation, I ask, how do the alternative social and discursive conventions produce and are produced by Pocketbooks' feminist (anti)violence discourse, and what possibilities and tensions arise in the process of (re)negotiating these practices? I explore the relationship between nonstandard conventions practiced by the Pocketbooks community and knowledge production—and the ways in which new practices and alternative discourses are leveraged in the hopes of enabling historically silenced populations to speak, participate, and express themselves. Rather than being understood as a fixed set of rules, these conventions are framed as continuously in (re)formation, contestation, and (re)imagination. Moreover, these practices are viewed in relation to participants' understandings of violence and safety.

Section 1 begins with a brief literature review of alternative forms of sociability, counterpublic discourse, and communities of practice. Moving the discussion to Pocketbooks, I consider a commonly used phrase in the bookshop, "take up space," as a metaphor for redressing the structural violence that forces marginalized people to self-censor their words, suppress their identities, and generally surrender their autonomy. Section 2

[37] As one participant pointed out to me at the time of writing, the right has been so successful in stigmatizing trigger warnings that most groups now opt for giving "content" warnings instead.

explores the social and discursive practices enacted at Pocketbooks and peoples' experiences of them. Finally, Section 3 concludes with a discussion of challenges participants identified and possibilities for change.

(1) IMAGINING A SAFER, COUNTERPUBLIC DISCOURSE

(1.1) COUNTERPUBLIC DISCOURSE, KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

In the previous chapter, I acknowledged the ways in which physical space—especially the built environment—can act as a mechanism for (re)producing sociospatial exclusions and how reordering spatial arrangements can challenge unjust geographies. But it is not only the materiality of dominant public space that may be exclusionary and violent. As Phillips and Cole (2013) have acknowledged, unwritten rules in publics govern habitus, thus effecting whose voices are heard and who has authority. Social norms that might be taken for granted as "natural" in dominant publics favor those most privileged by structures of power, and as a result, subordinated groups might be rendered invisible, silenced, or otherwise sidelined. Fraser (1990) refers to "protocols of style and decorum" which act as "informal impediments to participatory parity that can persist even after everyone is formally and legally licensed to participate" (1990: 63). She acknowledges, for instance, that "men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men; men also tend to speak more than women… and women's interventions are more often ignored…" (Fraser, 1999: 64). Travers (2003) has referred to this arena of discursive interaction as "conversation space" (2003: 225). Although Fraser (1990) and Travers (2003) write primarily through a gendered

lens, this same phenomenon applies to all unequal power relationships, not just between men and women.

Another way of describing this phenomenon is through the Foucauldian notion of *discourse* or "discursive interaction" (Fraser, 1990). Although notoriously challenging to pin down in a single definition, discourse has been described in the following ways:

> …ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the nature of the body, the unconscious and conscious mind, and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. (Weedon, 1987: 108).

> …a way of organising knowledge that structures the constitution of social…relations through the collective understanding of the discursive logic and acceptance of the discourse as social fact. (Adams, 2017).

Discourse is not produced in a non-hierarchical vacuum. It is "produced by effects of power within a social order, and this power prescribes particular rules and categories which define criteria for legitimating knowledge and truth within the discursive order" (Adams, 2017). Discourse can masquerade as a reflection of an objective reality rather than something that has "capacity to fix meaning" or "produce knowledge and meaning" (Adams, 2017). Moreover, commentary and social practices can form a "reiterative process" through which "discourse normalizes and homogenises, including upon the bodies and subjectivities of those it dominates" (Adams, 2017). Because not only does discourse fix and produce meaning, but combined with social practices, it also constitutes our subjectivities, "a broad term that refers to beliefs, attitudes, outlooks, convictions, subconscious, tendencies, orientations, proclivities, understandings, etc. that people may hold" (Bazzul, 2016: 7). The capacity of an individual to understand oneself, then, is constricted by social and discursive practices that are themselves vessels of power and domination. Dominant discourses not

only (informally) exclude marginalized people and inhibit their participation, then, but also limit the potential for them to articulate their needs and identities (which are likely invisible—or deemed unimportant—to more privileged members of the dominant public).

Counterpublics can create and provide alternative discursive arenas which "develop the resources to present a consistent challenge to dominant practices" (Kohn, 2001: 507); moreover, counterpublics offer "a space protected from the dominant discourse in which an alternative can be imagined, lived, and articulated" (Kohn, 2001: 507). In the creation of a counterpublic discourse, communities may suspend structures of power and subordination (to the extent possible) to allow for alternative forms of knowledge production and self-identification. For example, Warner (2002a) notes that queer counterpublics are "freed from heteronormative speech protocols" and that "the presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended" (2002a: 120). Steele (2013), whose research centers queer social movements in the Southern United States, writes how organized queer campouts—which function as temporary counterpublic spaces—generate "alternate discourse on gender and sexuality" (2013: 145), noting the nonnormative ways in which participants enact gender pronouns in their queer performativity. Steele (2013) also adds that these queer campouts enabled Southerners of marginalized sexualities to develop, assert, and express their identities (2013: 140).

This discursive potential of counterpublics echoes the linguistic framework of "communities of practice," (CoP) a concept that has grown out of the notion of a "speech community." A CoP is a type of public—or (counter)public, even—that is defined by mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). Moreover, the CoP framework is premised on the idea that language and discourse do not merely reflect social

life but also create it, too; as such, it enables us to conceptualize gender, for instance, as a "constructed (and therefore fluid and contingent) phenomenon" (Stapleton, 2001: 460). Power can also be observed through the CoP framework because in addition to learning the "appropriate" conventions within a CoP, people must also "learn the speaking rights and obligations associated with these particular discourses, within this particular community" (Stapleton, 2001: 463). This framework also reveals how membership status may be contingent on learning these conventions and how membership may exist on a continuum from peripheral to core based on peoples' grasp and appropriate performance of these speech practices (see: Holmes and Meyerhoff, 1999).

In contrast to "intimate publics" (Berlant, 2008)—where marginalized people may bond over their failure to achieve normativity but do not seek to suspend the structures or rewrite the practices that cause their feelings of inadequacy (see: Kanai, 2017)—queer counterpublics are marked by their intention to "offer an alternative to heteronormativity and an alternate discourse of acceptable sexual standards" (Steele, 2013: 132). While Berlant (2008) notes the intimate public is a site of "disappointment, but not disenchantment" (Berlant, 2008: 2), the counterpublic is not only a site of disenchantment but also a place where participants can "envision another world, but also live in it temporarily…" (Steele, 2013: 132). As Warner (2002a) writes, "Counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely" (2002a: 122). The aim of a counterpublic is to rewrite standards of acceptability and develop forms of sociability that increase—not diminish—the potential for oppressed groups to express themselves, live freely, and articulate their needs.

Finally, it should be noted that counterpublic discourse is not the same as counterculture. Consider the following quote:

> …counterpublic discourse is far more than the expression of subaltern culture and far more than what some Foucauldians like to call 'reverse discourse.' Fundamentally mediated by public forms, counterpublics incorporate the personal/impersonal address and expansive estrangement of public speech as conditions of their common world. (Warnera, 2002: 121)

Unlike counterculture, counterpublic discourse is committed "to stranger circulation in a way that is not just strategic but constitutive of membership and affects" (Warner, 2002a: 122). Warner adds that counterpublics "are 'counter' to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexibility" (2002a: 121-122). However, the alternative discourses generated within them are not restricted to—nor intended to be limited to—counterpublic spaces; they aim to expand into—or even disrupt—the public discursive arena.

The vocabulary developed in counterpublics, for instance, can infiltrate public discourse and transform the way members in dominant publics think about all sorts of subjects and relationships. Terms like "sexism," "the double shift," "sexual harassment," and "marital, date, and acquaintance rape" are idioms that were developed in the subaltern feminist counterpublic discourse (Fraser, 1990: 67), but they now "circulate as common terminology" (Warner, 2002a: 119). The language and ideas developed in the subaltern feminist counterpublic also helped bring issues of gender-based violence into public concern (Fraser, 1990: 71). It is not discourse alone that can be carried into dominant publics, though. Fraser (1990) argues that the confidence and vocabulary that women developed in the subaltern feminist counterpublic reduced the extent of their disadvantage in dominant publics (1990: 67). Processes of self-identification that emerge in counterpublic spaces "can

be carried into [the larger public]" (Steele, 2013: 140), as well. Although counterpublic discourse often emerges from spaces that may appear somewhat insular (inasmuch as they can be described as bounded), it is nevertheless oriented toward the public and creating social change.

(1.2) "TAKE UP SPACE": AN INTERSECTIONAL METAPHOR

Unlike a queer counterpublic, which is forged primarily around a shared identity and dismantling of a single structure of power (heteronormativity), as an intersectional feminist counterpublic, Pocketbooks seeks to redress all structures that uphold violence. Pocketbooks is not only a multi-issue space but a multi-identity space, and its discourse on (anti)violence must be expansive and inclusive enough to encompass all forms of structural violence, while also being specific enough to recognize the variations and intersections of peoples' experiences.

A phrase I heard on a regular—if not daily—basis was, "Take up space," or conversely, "Be mindful of how much space you're taking up." Taken at face value, this metaphor of taking up space evokes an idea of material space. However, at Pocketbooks, these were linguistic expressions that participants invoked to communicate sentiments about violence and justice; they were mostly used to talk about social interactions rather than physical space. These space-based metaphors are not dissimilar from Soja's (2010) concept of spatial (in)justice, except here, the concept of "space" covers discursive and social space more broadly—to the space of individual actors, not necessarily geographic locales.

One volunteer explained that taking up too much space is an *unconscious* manifestation of privilege. This prejudice is based on an implicit devaluation of people around them, or at least those who do not share their privileges. In other words, taking up space is built into the *habitus* of those who benefit from structures of power—something that gets reinforced through hegemonic discourse that continues to validate and affirm those voices. The volunteer said:

> The standard way that the straight, cis, able-bodied white man is socialized to behave in this culture… You're socialized to take up space, you're socialized to overvalue your own opinion and experience and undervalue those that are not like you. And to the degree they're not like you, you're supposed to value their opinion less. And that's not explicit. That was never a conscious goal in my mind, but I was doing it because I was socialized to do it in an unthinking way. And I'm sure I still do it to some extent, but you have to become aware of the ways you're doing it and then kind of take pause and take stock of what you're doing. And try to undo it. –Glen

I also recall a conversation with Chrissy, who was complaining that a man she did not know approached her on the subway and began speaking to her, expecting her attention. "Why did he think I owed him my time?" she asked rhetorically. Later that day at a restaurant, Chrissy told me she had another similar experience. She told me that she all she wanted was to eat her lunch in peace, but the men sitting next to her attempted to initiate conversation and persisted in speaking to her, despite her lack of engagement with them. Exhausted, she complained to me that she would have to see her cousin later, yet another "cishet white man who takes up too much space. Why do they think they are entitled to me?" In this example, Chrissy invokes "space" to refer to her energy, attention, and time. The subtle use of the "cishet white man" descriptor of her cousin makes explicit his

privileges,[38] which she then relates to his taking up more space than he ought to. What Chrissy's frustration alludes to is that people who benefit from systems of power take up not only public discursive space—the subject of Fraser's (1990) work, for example—but also infringe upon others' personal space, too. In other words, the power afforded by the very structures that marginalize others confers her cousin (and other privileged people) access to (and feelings of entitlement over) herself—to that which should belong to her.

This metaphor of taking up too much space was invoked in several other instances, too, such as: white people talking too much in a discussion about race, men being represented disproportionately in positions of responsibility, men hanging out behind the counter when they were not on shift, and customers (men) trying to engage conversations with uninterested (usually women) volunteers, to name but a handful of examples. "Taking up too much space" functioned as a catch-all metaphor to describe the ways in which people with privilege embody and reinforce power differentials in their everyday actions. In other words, taking up too much space is a phenomenon that is both produced by and reproduces structural violence.

When those with power take up too much space, there is less room for others to occupy theirs. Like Glen said, it involves the implicit devaluation of the people around them, which can lead to marginalized people feeling the need to (metaphorically, if not also in body) "shrink." Consider an internship experience one volunteer had previously:

> I was exclusively going by 'they' at the time, and I was kind of also figuring out gender stuff and things like that. And someone at my internship told me basically I should count on no one ever respecting that or respecting my gender. Or not necessarily respecting it, but understanding it in any sort of active way in a professional setting, and indeed that I should

[38] These include fitting into the gender binary and identifying with the gender assigned at birth (cisgender), aligning with heteronormativity (heterosexual), benefiting from white supremacy (white), and benefiting from patriarchy (man).

> count on people just making fun of me if I told them, that it was self-indulgent of me or something to request anything like that. This person later apologized, even years later sent me an apology, which was nice, but… –Pan

Pan's attempt to assert their own identity and have that respected —something that seems like a basic human right—was deemed too great an ask in the workplace. Unfortunately, Pan's experience is one of many I heard of participants elsewhere being encouraged to "shrink" or to occupy less space (or to occupy space only in ways deemed socially acceptable). I heard stories of people with disabilities being told they could not be promoted in the workplace, young people saying they were not trusted to have responsibilities, volunteers saying they could not dye their hair for fear of being fired, and women saying they dressed more conservatively to try to avoid unwanted attention.

The Safer Space Policy asserts that people need to be aware of the space they occupy. It reads, "Be aware of your prejudices and privileges and the space you take up at Pocketbooks," again making explicit the relationship between privilege and occupancy of space. This metaphor underscores the rest of the chapter. Much like Glen said of his own behavior, this kind of protocol encouraged people to be reflexive of their behaviors and language and to be cognizant that social norms are constructs that are by produced by and (re)produce power imbalances. However, restoring participatory parity—or redistributing "space"—cannot be achieved by some people taking up less space alone. Those who are normally silenced, ignored, or rendered invisible, must also be encouraged to exercise their autonomy, participate as much as they want, and assert themselves—in other words, to take up *more* space.

(2) CREATING AND IMPLEMENTING ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL AND DISCURSIVE PRACTICES

(2.1) CONVERSATION PROTOCOL FOR A SAFER DISCURSIVE ARENA: NEWFOUND FREEDOM TO SPEAK AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR (UN)LEARNING

Given that participation in discursive interactions usually corresponds to the comfort one has in speaking up—which is both produced by and (re)produces structures of power—conversation protocol was viewed as a social practice that in itself could be altered to restore participatory parity. Although elsewhere, conversations are dictated by informal conventions (which inevitably reinforce and favor the status quo), generating an alternative guideline for speaking—one that was made formal and explicit—was a tactic whereby hindrances to participation could be removed, or at least diminished.

Expectations for conversations in Pocketbooks were markedly different from elsewhere, and in meetings or discussion groups, a moderator would begin by announcing the protocol to participants. The way in which they were outlined varied slightly between groups, but the following example, as given by the moderator of the Feminist Discussion of Masculinity group, is representative of the kind of guidelines typically given: (i) "Speak from the first person"; (ii) "Try to keep your contributions based in personal experience and not generalize"; (iii) "Be aware of how much you're speaking, and make sure there's room for everyone to participate." Although these rules were made formal in discussion groups, they were also the expectations of volunteers more generally, even in informal chats.

As these guidelines suggest, taking up conversational space was reserved primarily for those with experience with the subject at hand. People who benefited from the structure(s) of power being discussed were generally encouraged to engage primarily

through active listening rather than verbal participation; by contrast, participants oriented to these powers through their forced subordination were encouraged to speak as much as possible. This convention meant, for instance, that in a conversation about race, white people were advised to be speak as little as possible and to prioritize and amplify voices of people of color (because after all, conversational space is not infinite, and white people dominate public discourse as is). In practice, speaking from first person meant that most people began their comments with reference to their identity or relationship to the subject being discussed. For example, in a discussion group pertaining to sexuality, someone might say "As a queer person, I have experienced…" or, "As a lesbian, I feel…"

Guidelines like these have been labeled as a form of "identity politics," something that has been described as "a philosophical punching bag for a lot of critics" (Heyes, 2020). An article in *The Guardian* says, "Safe spaces is a direct corollary of identity politics" and then posits safe spaces as antithetical to free speech, arguing that they "[restrict] right of debate" because "the identity of the person [becomes] as important as the words they are saying" (Dunt, 2015). This allegation, however, raises the question of free speech *for whom*; as I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the discursive arena is not one in which all participants have equal access to voice their opinions and identities, because informal rules create barriers to participation (see: Fraser, 1990).

Contrary to depictions of free speech as under threat, the participants I spoke to—who shared their experiences of being silenced in other arenas—expressed a newfound freedom to express themselves, something that helped them regain a sense of personal autonomy, recognition, and self-confidence. One volunteer highlighted the political dialogues they can have at Pocketbooks but not elsewhere:

> It's like a clubhouse where we can talk about things that we don't have a lot of places to talk about. When we want to talk about some super shitty racist thing that was on all of our Facebook feeds, there's no guarantee you have a circle of friends outside Pocketbooks that will understand—like criticizing something that you love, or a piece of art or media that you're into but you nevertheless feel like you have to criticize because it has sexist or racist dimensions to it, and you want to be in a place where you can actually have some kind of nuanced conversation about it. I definitely came from a place where that wasn't easy outside of here. –Georgia

Another volunteer contrasted her experiences at Pocketbooks to her paid work which, incidentally, was at another bookstore. She said:

> I think I have weird interests and at a place like Pocketbooks people are generally open-minded, so I feel like I can talk freely about whatever kind of things I'm into. Whereas if I'm chatting with my co-workers, I can't be like, 'Oh, I read tarot cards.' Or like crouch it in some [disclaimer], 'But don't worry, I'm a reasonable person.' I can't really talk about my political beliefs that explicitly. If there's a discussion, I'll be like, 'Trump is the devil, but I can't be like, 'Here's a copy of the *Communist manifesto*.' –Betty

Additionally, expanding the landscape of discursive participation afforded participants opportunities to learn about others—their identities, experiences of violence, and viewpoints—that they may never have been exposed to in dominant public discourse. One volunteer said that this learning started with an awareness of other kinds of people, which sparked a sense of curiosity and desire to learn more:

> I never knew there were this many kinds of people before interning at Pocketbooks. I didn't even know about vegans. After that, seeing all of these different kinds of people made me want to think, 'I wonder how this person lives their life? What is their lifestyle like, how do they go day to day, what do they do? –Geof

Consider the following comment about the opportunity to learn from others:

> And just from being around different people and talking to different people, listening to people, hearing about peoples' experiences and what not, things that I don't experience… I mean I can't know what it's like to have those experiences, but I can have a certain level of understanding [from] hearing those experiences. Like with our events, I hear about things I wouldn't have gone through, but I was in the space at the time and I'm like, 'Oh, I never considered those things.' There's been a lot of learning, which is something I like a lot. –Amanda

Other volunteers said they learned about racism and disability:

> I think about disability issues more. That's not something… that was a very large part of my family growing up... Also, as a white person, I don't talk about race very often, and sort of still don't, which I wish I did more. But it's definitely been brought up more at Pocketbooks than anywhere else. –Danny

Without the fear of being silenced or invalidated, participants were able to share traumas, which, in other spaces, might have resulted in the speaker being questioned, contradicted, and/or gaslighted—abusive discursive tactics that prevent survivors from freely engaging in dialogue about their experiences of trauma. But what was so remarkable about this newfound ability to speak openly about violence was how mundane it was to those acclimated to the space. This realization dawned on me during an event, which opened with a woman saying, "I am a rape survivor." I hardly took notice of what she had said; events and sharing personal experiences like this were familiar and quotidian to me by this point, and I was engrossed in a book. However, sitting next to me in the café area was a reporter from the *New York Times* who had never been to Pocketbooks before but had come to write a piece about the shop. He turned to me, aghast, and said, "Wow. Did that woman just say—in front of all of these people—that she was raped?"

My initial response to his question was confusion, but his surprise spoke to the radically different discourse made possible where survivors like this woman were allowed—and encouraged—to take up space. These findings align what Dey (2020a) writes about the digital feminist counterpublic space; Indian women sharing their experiences of violence empowered others to share their stories, too, making impermissible speech permissible and acting as a form of healing in the process. One volunteer reiterated that part of what makes Pocketbooks so special is:

> …just having a place where I know I can have a voice, and can have an input, and that's respected and what not... I don't really know how to articulate it, what that is specifically. But everything to do with that sort of culture—because out there, it's not like that… I felt safe here. It's such an important place…this place gives [people] a space where they can just feel better about themselves and feel part of a community that respects and values them and tries to uplift them and empower them. And gives them a voice and something to contribute. –Belle

Unlike portrayals of safe spaces as silencing, Belle describes Pocketbooks as a place that gives her (and others like her) a voice—a voice that is *elsewhere* silenced.

(2.2) DISCOMFORT AND DISAGREEMENT

Boostrom (1998: 407) asks, "Is it possible to 'attend to the plurality of consciousnesses' without censoring critical thinking?" His question, though primarily rhetorical, suggests that even though it is important for people to be heard, "we also need to be able to respond to those voices, to criticize them, to challenge them" (1998: 407). However, reflections by participants at Pocketbooks suggest that Boostrom (1998) underestimates the power of a discursive arena that encourages engagement by listening, not only "challenging" (which, in practice, often means talking over marginalized people). Rather than seeing Pocketbooks' discursive conduct as an assault on free speech, several men I spoke to in the shop saw it as an opportunity to be introduced to new ideas and to challenge themselves. A man named Mike, who regularly attended the Feminist Discussion of Masculinity group, told me he learned the word 'hypermasculinity' there; he also said this whole concept of "taking up space" is "definitely a new thing for me." He started attending the group a few months after his girlfriend broke up with him, who said she was frustrated

by his lack of understanding everyday sexism and his own masculine sensibilities (even down to his film preferences). Of one of the women in the group, he said:

> Someone in the group said, 'why should masculinity even exist?' She's given me something to think about, whether masculinity is necessary…also how I relate to other men, how I socialize, how this impacts my individual behavior. –Mike

His comment hints that not only was he encouraged to reflect on questions that he may never have considered, but also that he began being more reflexive of his own actions—even questioning habitus he had previously experienced as "natural." Rather than being the *challenger*, as men are often accustomed to being in dominant public discourse, Mike became the *challengee.* The typical dynamics of exchange were flipped on their head because conversation space for marginalized voices was prioritized over his own. He added:

> For me it's a bit fraught, it's uncomfortable. I'm challenging myself… In my view, it's a good thing, it means you're thinking about things, you're trying to evaluate subconscious behavior that you may be a blind spot that you may not be aware of. For me, the reason I take [notes] is because there's the obvious misogyny that exists in the world and then there's the stuff that exists beneath the surface that isn't obvious, that's objectifying. It's been an interesting critical trip to go through all of that. For me it's been invaluable.

That Mike calls this process "fraught" and "uncomfortable" speaks to Boostrom's (1998) argument that discomfort is essential to learning. Mike's discomfort with this process speaks to the difficulty of turning inward to examine the way he embodies masculinity, including the ways in which that internalized toxic masculinity might harm others. Although Warner (2002a: 121) writes that marginalized people therefore enter dominant publics "at their own risk," at Pocketbooks, this "risk" is inverted: people who benefit from structures of power risk being forced (or rather, encouraged) to reckon with the ways in which they may inadvertently harm others. Of course, these forms of "discomfort" (or "risk") are not comparable. The discomfort Mike feels reflects his grappling with privilege and guilt,

whereas the "discomfort" a marginalized person experiences in dominant publics reflects the structural violence that seeks to uphold their subordinated status. Nevertheless, the "hierarchy or stigma [that] is the assumed background of practice" (Warner, 2002a: 121) in dominant publics is suspended at Pocketbooks, but the discomfort that accompanies growth and learning is still present. Mike added:

> I'm very thankful for it. If this didn't exist, where would I have that outlet?... So, for me, this is amazing. This inclusion. It's still a journey that I'm on. –Mike

Additionally, Boostrom writes that, "When everyone's voice is accepted, and no one's voice can be criticized, then no one can grow" (1998: 407). Participants not only voiced that they experienced personal and intellectual growth, but also contested the idea that no one can be directly challenged. One volunteer said:

> Conflict is critical. In a setting where we're supposed to be non-hierarchical, conflict is at the heart of it! Having a space with openness in communication, saying what you really think, and disagreement… you're stronger because you're welcoming a diversity of perspectives. –Estaban

He added that what is different about Pocketbooks is that there is an effort to engage in "nonviolent communication,"[39] which he described as asserting one's needs and listening to the needs of the other person—rather than simply aggressively attacking or reacting defensively. Other volunteers described this nonviolent communication as being foregrounded in trust, receptiveness, humility, and kindness. Consider the following comments:

[39] Nonviolent communication, although also a communication employed at Pocketbooks, was first developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s and 1970s, and his book *Nonviolent communication: a language of life* is still influential today (see: Rosenberg, 1999).

> I think in general there's an openness to being corrected and a general move forward with kindness.
>
> The word that comes to mind is 'expectations.' The expectations I have when I talk are a little higher when I come here, compared to meeting strangers on the street. I have a higher expectation people will be willing to listen to me, will give me the benefit of the doubt…. having that mutual understanding when talking is a big deal.
>
> I'm gonna trust when someone else says something at Pocketbooks they're coming at it with the best intentions. And that I can then also—they also have to trust—I also have to then be able to trust then when I'm like, 'Hey this isn't cool and here's why,' and that they're gonna listen to that and try to change that.

I found that people opted for ways of disagreeing with each other that did not infringe on other people's space but encouraged them to engage in more reflexive and critical thinking. Not only were people like Mike challenged because of what they were (un)learning, but phrases like, "I hear you," "I'm hearing," or "From my perspective, however, I think maybe that…" were common linguistic segues into disagreements. This way of using language to express disagreement was reflected in the guidelines in the Feminist Discussion of Masculinity, too: "Let one person speak at a time, and try to respond to specific points"; "Don't be afraid to ask for clarification, understand that everyone is trying to build collective knowledge and not trying to judge"; "It's okay to challenge others/yourself when it's done according to above principles"; "Oops/ouch: if something hurtful is said, it's good to acknowledge (and also assume it was unintentional)."

For example, in a passing comment at the Feminist Discussion of Masculinity, one of the men said, "Well, because there are only two genders…" and proceeded to say something about relationships between men and women. However, the moderator responded, "I noticed you mentioned there are only two genders. I want to challenge you on this point," and she continued explaining the wide variety of genders, pronouns, and experiences. The man who

had made the initial comment, said, "Whoa, thank you for sharing. I'm new to all of this, and that's the first time I've ever heard something like that before." In approaching him from this point of compassion and assumed ignorance, the moderator created an opportunity to expose the other speaker (and even the rest of the group) to ideas one may never encounter in dominant discourse. What participants shared was a receptiveness to being challenged, rather than a defensiveness to hold their original position(s). This orientation towards debate is significantly different to adversarial speech events in which there is a winner and a loser—a method of debate that favors contestation over engagement, and which tends to favor men over other less privileged speakers.[40]

(2.3) PRONOUNS AND GENDER IDENTITY: SELF-IDENTIFICATION, PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION, AND AN EMERGING DISCOURSE ON GENDER

As participants acknowledged, dominant discourse is cisheteronormative, as are the linguistic and behavioral conventions that constitute and are constituted by it. Cisheteronormativity—a word that I heard frequently at Pocketbooks but is probably unfamiliar to people elsewhere—refers to "the systemic normalization and privileging of bodies, identities, and subjectivities that most closely align with white cisgender and heterosexual cultural experiences" (LeMaster et al., 2019). For example, gender is typically

[40] Shaw (2000), for example, writes about parliamentary debates in the British House of Commons, which are described as "speech events which foreground issues of power and the 'floor'" (2000: 401). The floor is seen as a place for "political and professional gain," as a site of contestation (2000: 401). This adversarial speech arena favors men over women, even though they are ostensibly members of the same community of practice (2000: 416). Interestingly, this portrayal of parliamentary debates resonates with Boostrom's (1990) romanticized ideal of the classroom, where challenge is understood as the ability to debate aggressively and without abandon, rather than a willingness to listen and exchange ideas while being mindful of the potentiality for discourse to (re)produce violence.

thought of (in Western culture) as a binary (men and women), and gender is assumed to correspond to two sexes (male and female). The gender binary is reflected in and reinforced by everyday language and dominant practices regarding stranger sociability. For example, in conventional (read: dominant) discourse, two pronouns exist: "he" and "she." In ordinary linguistic practice, "they" is gender neutral but is reserved as a plural pronoun. Additionally, people who do not know each other will typically assign and use gendered pronouns based upon how they read each other's appearances, a reading that is both produced by and reproduces cisheteronormative ideas about gender and gender presentation. Unlike someone's name, for example, which must be communicated before a stranger can use it, pronouns are assumed based upon gendered perceptions. These are some of the most basic ways in which cisheteronormativity underscores linguistic and social conventions but are by no means exhaustive of the ways in which dominant gender discourse fixes meaning, is reinforced through stranger sociability, and shapes subjectivities.

One of the first sentences of Pocketbooks' Safer Space Policy states: "Respect everyone's identity and background, including pronouns and names. Do not assume anyone's gender, sexuality, survivor status, economic status, background, health, etc." Although the policy does not list the ways in which cisheteronormativity pervades everyday life, several practices within the community not only provided alternative forms of sociability but rendered visible the ways in which our lives are shaped by dominant concepts of gender.

For example, a typical practice at Pocketbooks was to introduce oneself not only with one's name but also with pronouns (for example, in meetings and discussion groups, I would introduce myself, "Hi, I'm Rachel, and my pronouns are she/her"). In less formal

situations (where we might not be introducing ourselves), if a person's pronouns were unknown, it was appropriate to ask them, much in the same way a name could be asked for; it was not considered rude or intrusive, but an act of courtesy and respect. If people were talking about someone who was not around and whose pronouns were unknown, the default pronoun was, "they," which acted as a gender neutral and singular pronoun. Although ordinary stranger sociability *assumes* cisheteronormativity, the practice of asking rather than assuming pronouns and defaulting to a singular gender-neutral pronoun suspended this backdrop of normative expectations.

Empowering people to give their pronouns meant that people whose pronouns (and genders) did not "match" normative expectations of their gender performativity did not have to suffer the trauma, invalidation, and frustration that they might experience elsewhere. Having a place where they were encouraged to express themselves—and where they knew others would respect their identities—came as an immense relief. This state of being often is reduced to "comfort" in safe space literature. However, volunteer comments suggest that this "comfort" is more akin to reprieve from the expectation of violence (and the suspension of ontological insecurity that accompanies a near-constant state of fear)—something that more privileged people experience as a given in dominant publics. Consider the comments from volunteers who identified as transgender and/or non-binary:

> Yes, it's a weight and it makes you doubt yourself when it's that consistent. So, it's nice going to a place where I can at least not have to think about that aspect of my life. –Sierra

> You know, nothing is assumed here. Just naturally [elsewhere], people make so many assumptions and what not, and that can be really frustrating. –Jan

> It was really important because it was a place I could go and just be. It was the only place I had besides Tumblr where people used the right name, the right pronouns. –Sian

> Just having a space where you can be [is] special. I mean for me, at least, [it's] a place I could be emotionally present and not have to be emotionally on guard to things that might potentially be [harmful]. Because asides from obvious physical safety, just emotionally feeling that you can be there without having to worry about being compromised, just not have to think about that other shit, basically, that stuff you're forced to think about all the time. –Petar

Moreover, having a place where people of marginalized genders could simply "be" allowed for participants to engage in processes of self-identification, transformation, and growth. Consider the following comments by volunteers who identified as trans and/or non-binary:

> In that time [volunteering] I had started to come to terms with the fact that I was trans and that was very much due to the fact that I had finally gotten exposure to that language at Pocketbooks. And the same thing with acknowledging that I was not straight. That was a huge part of being in at Pocketbooks and being exposed to other people that were not angry teenagers about it. I bought books and read about things and suddenly one day I was like, 'Ooooh, fuck.' And I was like, 'Okay, I've got to deal with this.' And I wasn't out to my family for a long time, and it became really, really stressful. And I started spending more and more time at Pocketbooks. Like I would skip school, I would skip my other internship, I would just stay there really late. I was there a lot, a lot. –Leon

> What Pocketbooks and my friend-group had in common is they gave me places to gender express and gender explore and have my gender respected by people. –Zo

The knowledge production that emerged from this discourse also helped produce a more varied landscape of possible gendered subjectivities through which people could develop and explore their own identities outside of normative expectations, which they may not have previously realized they needed or wanted. One volunteer said, "I used to be one of those people who was like, 'But "they" is a plural pronoun! It can't be used for a singular person." They laughed and added, "Yeah, now I identify as nonbinary and use they/them pronouns." This new discourse on gender, then, not only allowed cisgender and gender-conforming people to learn about other peoples' experiences with gender (a point to which I return later in this section), but also provided new frameworks for people to explore their

own identities. Because subjectivities are constrained by discourse, expanding discourse means that there are greater opportunities for people to understand themselves beyond the gender binary and to question whether they truly identify with it—even if they had never previously realized that other genders might exist. One volunteer, who explored their gender by engaging with the Pocketbooks community and with another online community, said that this more expansive, inclusive discourse on gender and sexuality could have changed his life as a teenager:

> I would have so much less knowledge of who I am as a person. But also, in terms of my gender and my sexuality, because people don't talk about these things, they don't have the resources, they don't talk about non-binary genders, we don't talk about asexuality. There are things that exist and are real, and if I had known these things when I was the age of some of these people that are fourteen, fifteen, it would have changed my life—like really, really changed my life. And that's what is really important to me is that we get that information out.

This alternative discourse and stranger sociability—although in many ways unique to Pocketbooks for being the *standard* and expected convention—was intended to be carried out into other publics and discursive arenas, too. Many volunteers told me that even though it felt awkward to introduce themselves with their names and pronouns in other places, they still made the attempt to do so to help bring this gender discussion into other communities. One volunteer said doing so could sometimes be awkward, but he persisted anyway:

> I feel compelled to ask pronouns at the bar and other places where it's not a normal social practice. Pocketbooks has affected me in that I'm tempted to ask pronouns, but people react so strangely. It's clearly seen as something to not do. Maybe I should do it anyway.

However, there were some instances where participants chose to use certain pronouns and names in the shop, but they asked that if we were in other public spaces (or other settings), that we use their given name and genders. This was because they may not

have been ready to share more publicly that they did not identify with their assigned gender—perhaps out of fear of lack of acceptance or even fear of physical violence. As such, in this capacity, Pocketbooks functioned as a place where they could safely experiment with other gender identities, try out new pronouns and names, and express themselves, even when doing so elsewhere was still too unsafe. For many participants, it was the only community where they could take up gendered space in the way they wished. In doing so, Pocketbooks also provided them a place to heal. As one volunteer said, "But like, you need a place to train. You need a place to heal. There's just no way around that."

Nevertheless, the discourse and practices developed at Pocketbooks were oriented toward creating public social change so that one day, participants could be themselves in dominant publics without fear of violence. As Fraser (1990) acknowledges, counterpublics can increase public awareness of systemic violence through the articulation of new vocabulary; moreover, "[j]ust as violence is connected to heteronormative language, violence has the potential to be undone through the use of sensitive and inclusive language" (King, 2016: 22). The Pocketbooks community utilized an alternative, nonnormative vocabulary to articulate gender identities, gendered experiences, and forms of violence. For example, a phrase I heard in the shop was "assigned female at birth" (or "assigned male at birth"). These phrases were typically invoked to differentiate between a person's gender identity and their sex. To refer to gender as "assigned" is to highlight that gender is *socially* conferred from the moment a person is born (or even in the womb) rather than naturally given. In various discussions and interviews, I heard a multitude of genders beyond the gender binary, such as: nonbinary, agender, transgender, genderfluid, genderqueer, gender neutral, and pangender—just to highlight a handful of examples. Moreover, I heard

pronouns that are not commonly heard in dominant discourse, such as xe/xim/xyr or they/them/theirs (singular).

Participants also developed vocabulary to articulate forms of violence that may not be recognized as such in dominant publics. For example, a term that I heard on many occasions was "misgendering." To misgender is to (intentionally or unintentionally) use the incorrect pronouns or gendered language to refer to someone. Along similar lines, "deadnaming" was another term I heard, which means referring to someone by their former (usually given) name, rather than their actual name. Misgendering and deadnaming are primarily (if not exclusively) experienced by people who fall outside of normative gender expectations. Other terms to describe violence were "transphobia" (overt and/or implicit prejudice and discrimination toward transgender and/or gender nonconforming people), "transmisogyny" (a subset of transphobia where misogyny and transphobia intersect), and "transmisogynoir" (a subset of transmisogyny where anti-Black racism and transmisogyny intersect).

Given that people are socialized in the cisheteronormative discursive arena, this breadth of vocabulary and knowledge afforded participants the opportunity to learn in ways they could not elsewhere. Two cisgender woman, when asked about what they had learned while volunteering at Pocketbooks, said:

> I'm much more aware of pronouns. Certainly, in other parts of my life I've been trained to assume heteronormativity, and I'm still getting used to breaking that habit. –Selena

> I've learned lot of gender stuff. This was the first place I used pronouns. And people were super kind about it. They were like, 'These are my pronouns, these are why I use them. And when I fucked it up, they were like, 'These are not my pronouns,' and I tried again. That was a very important experience for me. –Rae

Volunteers also shared that being in this community afforded them an opportunity to think more critically about gender and to normalize nonnormative gender expression and identities. Consider the following comments by two cisgender volunteers:

> I'm almost embarrassed about my ignorance. In my Senior year in college, I took Intro to Gender Studies, and I resisted taking it for so long…. I remember that class when we were discussing being cisgender versus trans I could not wrap my head around it: But, like, body parts! And we read this one essay that was like, 'Rather than talking about healthcare for women you should talk about healthcare for people with uteruses or people who menstruate.' And I was like, 'What?' I did not even compute. And I think that by the time I graduated I was a bit more receptive or aware that things were more complicated than I originally thought them to be. There are so many identities that I didn't really encounter until I came to Pocketbooks…. Through most of high school I thought I knew like three queer people. And also, so many of my friends in high school were not out because it was not an environment where you could be out. But there were so many conversations that I hadn't have. And I think that Pocketbooks is a place where those conversations are possible. –Em

> I think trans issues in particular are something I didn't know a whole lot about. There's a lot about being trans that I don't understand, which is common for cis people,
> but I hadn't met any trans people before. So just being around trans people was just a normalizing experience. Whereas being on the Internet, there are a lot of trans people who express themselves, but it's different…. It's different to understand it in real life and hear people talking about it. I have read a lot of trans stuff beyond Tumblr, but the experience of being around… I mean that's one of the best things about being
> at Pocketbooks is being around all different kinds of people who feel safe there. –Cassidy

Finally, with the shared recognition that contesting cisheteronormative discourse matters, participants were able to be critical of their own practices and language, too. For example, one non-binary volunteer said she was grateful Pocketbooks had moved past using "MTF" and "FTM" terms (male to female and female to male), or language that acknowledges some transgender people but erases those who do not identify with the gender binary. However, she lamented that people in the shop still use the phrase "preferred pronouns." She said:

> Stop using the phrase 'preferred pronouns!' Start using the phrase,
> 'Correct pronouns!' Because I'm like, 'preferred' is a soft word, if that makes sense. And it makes sense as a discourse that we say 'preferred,' but I'm at the point where I'm like, no,

> it's not 'preferred.' It's correct or not. … It's an example of discourse evolving over time and me evolving in space. –Tani

Additionally, a passionate debate took place in an email thread about the use of they/them pronouns. One volunteer started noticing that more people (who were perceived, at the very least, as cisgender men) were using he/him and they/them pronouns as a way of distancing themselves from their power, or as a way to dissociate (and fail to recognize) their privileges. Another volunteer vehemently disagreed and argued that comments like these prevent transgender women and non-binary people from asserting their identities, because they are often dismissed as men trying to invade women's spaces. They added that telling masculine people to not use they/them pronouns might discourage people from exploring their gender identities, as well.[41] Yet another volunteer asked the question of whether we are trying to move towards a post-gender world in which all people are referred to by "they" pronouns, or whether we want a world in which there is an even greater diversity and plurality of gendered expressions. This disagreement only scratches the surface of the debates that volunteers engaged in, but I share it to demonstrate the ways in which participants were critical of their own practices and continued to challenge their own discourse, not just publicly dominant ones. Having a place where participants were united in their aim to challenge cisheteronormativity meant there was room to reflect on the shortcomings of their counterpublic discourse and social practices, too.

[41] Years after this discussion took place, a participant and I were remembering how it all unfolded, and they told me that they are still annoyed by this debate. They are non-binary AMAB and they said that it creates such a chilling effect for other AMAB folks to explore their gender, because they might be accused of "faking it." They added that it is especially alienating to hear this coming from fellow trans and non-binary folks and that it seems like "internalized TERF talking points." (AMAB = assigned male at birth. TERF = trans-exclusionary radical feminist.)

(2.4) BOUNDARIES AND CONSENT: RETHINKING ACCEPTABLE SOCIAL NORMS AND THE PARAMETERS OF VIOLENCE

Something that the contemporary feminist discourse has brought into public consciousness is the notion of consent—and by extension, boundaries. In particular, feminists have highlighted issues related to sexual consent, such as: the capacity (or lack thereof) to consent while intoxicated, that consent can be withdrawn at any point during a sexual interaction, that consent should be given freely and enthusiastically, affirmative consent (consent given as a "yes," rather than something assumed until a person says, "no"), that consent cannot be assumed even in partnerships, that there is no such thing as "blurred lines" or a "grey area," and that consent may still be an insufficient framework from which to conceptualize violence. Moreover, feminist discourse highlights that sexual violence is not only (or primarily) the kinds of back-alley stranger situations that have been engrained into our collective social consciousness. Instead, sexual violence can look like someone convincing their partner to engage in a sexual act despite them signaling disinterest, continuing with a sexual act that the other person may have initially consented to but now wishes to stop, or initiating sexual conduct with an inebriated person. Although many of these situations may have previously been described as acceptable (even normal), or at most, categorized into a grey area, feminist discourse on consent has the potential to reshape public perceptions of these situations as violent (e.g., understanding unwanted sexual contact within a partnership as coercion, not seduction). Moreover, this discourse entails that violence is much more widespread than previously imagined, because many people may not even have acknowledged there were boundaries to be crossed in the first place.

One of the first lines of Pocketbooks' Safer Space Policy says, "Respect everyone's physical and emotional boundaries. Check in before discussing topics that may be triggering (e.g., sexual abuse, physical violence or encounters with police), and use trigger warnings during presentations and events." Several volunteers highlighted the role of boundaries and consent at Pocketbooks, both in relation to respecting other peoples' boundaries (and being aware of where those might be), as well as setting their own (and helping others do the same). Consider the following two volunteer comments:

> I really like that Pocketbooks is a place that encourages a kind of strength—of ferocity—in a way that stands directly antithetical to machismo and aggression. This is a subject of continual conversation, but I do think that in general people are pretty open about discussing boundaries. And that you can put up boundaries. And that they should be respected. And that's a fundamental right. And the ability to say 'no' and stand your ground. Especially in a femme-centric space, I think that's really important to what we do. –Ally

> … the closest we can get to [safety] is mostly through respect, with different branches of that: respecting identities, respecting boundaries. And I don't mean 'respect' in the same way that people mean authority, like 'respect your elders.' No, that means authority. I mean it like… empowering people to say 'no.' If someone is like, 'Oh are you cool with hugs, if not that's totally fine.' Just respecting people's decisions. –Myla

Volunteers emphasized that there are many boundaries that people are unaware of and regularly cross in everyday life—not necessarily out of malice, but out of ignorance. For example, although asking for pronouns was considered an important linguistic practice to redress cisheteronormative violence, it was considered violent to ask questions about a person's body or identity. Pronouns are public facing and for public use. However, identities and bodies are *not* for public consumption, despite being treated this way elsewhere. Unless someone willingly offered this information, it was considered not only intrusive to ask, but a nonconsensual and therefore violent boundary crossing. One transgender volunteer said the

recognition and respect of this boundary at Pocketbooks is a drastic change from her experiences outside Pocketbooks:

> Even having certain understood boundaries [makes Pocketbooks safer]. Nobody will just—at least in my experience—nobody is just asking me things that they're not entitled to about my body, or things like that. It's basic, or really what should be basic common practice, but of course isn't in our world. –Milly

Because more boundaries are recognized by the community than in most other places, encountering boundaries could also act as a teachable moment for those who accidentally crossed them. Consider the following volunteer, who learned about a person's boundary with alcohol by unknowingly overstepping it:

> I feel sometimes I'm less aware about issues than other people are, but I think that's tied up with being privileged. I think little things that I wasn't used to doing, like…. This might be more NYC culture clash, but asking people to go get drinks is my intuitive social thing. But there are people who are straight edge and don't consume alcohol, so it's too presumptuous to assume that that's an okay offer. I had texted someone about drunk bowling and they responded, 'Thanks for the offer, but by the way, I wasn't upset, but I wanted to let you know I don't drink and can't be in that environment.' I felt bad. Ninety percent of my social interactions happen in a bar. –Daniel

Like Daniel, I found myself encountering boundaries and reasons for their existence that I had never previously encountered, despite my familiarity with safer spaces. For example, one night after leaving the bar with a volunteer with my friend Monica, she asked, "Hug?" as we parted ways. At first, I was thrown off by the question, as friends normally embrace one another without asking; consent for hugs in most friendships is normally assumed. However, after this incident, I noticed that other volunteers regularly asked each other this question in the shop, too, and would rarely go in for a hug without asking first. As one volunteer told me, there are many reasons someone might not want to be touched: survivors may be more prone to traumatic flashbacks, autistic and neurodivergent people may experience sensory overload and find physical touch overbearing, and others may

simply not be in the mood. Asking someone whether they wanted physical touch not only empowered them to make decisions about their bodily autonomy, but also raised awareness that a boundary exists (as does the possibility for enacting violence). This conduct expanded the discourse on acceptable physical touch beyond sexual contact, too—something that often alludes mainstream conversations about consent.

As the Safer Space Policy asserts, trigger warnings were given to respect peoples' emotional boundaries. Trigger warnings were given at events, in formal discussion groups, and/or in informal conversations where sensitive topics might be raised. For example, someone might say, "As a heads up, some of the excerpts from the book I'm reading contain graphic depictions of sex. Please feel free to leave at any point with no questions asked." One volunteer likened trigger warnings to food labels. After all, food labels are legally required to contain ingredient lists to inform consumers about their food intake. Armed with knowledge, people can avoid potential allergic reactions, make decisions about their health, or simply exert autonomy over their consumption. As the volunteer told me, no one makes a fuss about food labels because there is a consensus that serious harm can be done to an individual if they do not know what they are consuming (as in the case of an allergic reaction, for example). However, because structural violence and post-traumatic stress are not seen as something widespread amongst marginalized communities, something like trigger warnings, which function in a similar manner, are deemed unnecessary. One person I spoke to said that this rejection of trigger warnings reflects how stigmatized mental health is; they said, "There's no virtue in forcing someone to eat a peanut, but for some reason a book by an abuser is too important to deny yourself." Another volunteer said:

> I think there's a misunderstanding of what trigger warnings are, especially in an academic settings. It's not a, 'Don't read this book,' it's a, 'Heads up, this might contain something

> that's upsetting to people for various reasons.' I think people hear that and think censorship. In a way, I can understand that knee jerk reaction because of the amount of people who have proposed banning books. but it's so not the same thing. It just shows how this message has been distorted and how people just don't understand what the purpose of content warnings and trigger warnings are. –Sierra

One volunteer said that rather than encouraging a culture that forces people to develop a thicker skin, trigger warnings—along with other forms of boundary recognition—fostered a culture of compassion and care. She said:

> Coming from a survivor standpoint, if we value peoples' emotional health, we're gonna tell them something might be really difficult. Like, 'If you've had this experience, just so you know, this movie contains this scene, it happens here, perhaps you'll wanna leave'…. People saying trigger warnings are stupid and don't matter: that's not true, that's one hundred percent not true. What you're saying is that peoples' emotional health matters less to you than you being able to do whatever you want. And that's an incredibly privileged standpoint. That just comes from a position of never having experienced any kind of oppression, not difficulty, but true oppression, I think. Or just not realizing that maybe we wanna live in a world where we wanna care about each other. –Ada

A few volunteers expressed anger over the ways that trigger warnings are portrayed in the dominant safer space discourse. One volunteer added that despite giving trigger warnings, Pocketbooks does not shy away from hosting events on traumatic and confronting topics. Another highlighted that people who criticize trigger warnings probably lack an understanding of privilege and power. They said:

> Calling something a 'safer space' is not like handing out floaties when you get in the door. Pocketbooks is way fucking more than three feet deep. Have you seen our events roster? That is some triggering shit. –Mani

> In general, I think it's mainly men who are like, 'Fuckin' pussies need trigger warnings!'…. but then a very a succinct point they wouldn't understand, and I'd have to try to explain in depth what privilege is, and have to go back to Sexism and Racism 101. —Christina

Additionally, much in the way that a food label does not necessarily dissuade people from consuming a product, trigger warnings rarely discouraged people from engaging with

the topic at hand. During the open mic night I mentioned earlier, for instance, before reading her poetry, a woman mentioned, “I’d just like to give a heads up for a sexual assault trigger warning. So, feel free to leave at any point, and that’s totally fine.” Nobody did leave, and in fact, I never witnessed a single person leave an event simply because a trigger warning was given. What trigger warnings did provide was an opportunity for people to opt *in*—to consent to the conversation at hand and to withdraw at any point. Rather than assuming that people should be fine with (and consent to) any conversation, trigger warnings recognize peoples’ autonomy and that consent should not be assumed.

Moreover, as one volunteer said, trigger warnings also signify the way in which the speaker understands violence and therefore communicates a type of ideology that the audience can make sense of. As I have already emphasized, Warner (2002a: 115) writes that trusting people to “read” as you do makes strangers feel more like comrades; giving trigger warning signified a certain understanding (“reading”) of violence and therefore enabled people to feel like they were amongst a community of people who simply “get it,” as one person told me. One volunteer said regarding trigger warnings, “Here I just know everyone is on board with the same good social activist stuff. Everyone is looking out for each other in a way, we’re on the same team.” Trigger warnings allow strangers to communicate that they read violence in the same way, thus fostering a sense of trust amongst participants.

Nevertheless, one volunteer said that trigger warnings can sometimes be harmful and that it can be frustrating if there is no room for nuance in these debates. She said that because feminists often feel the need to defend trigger warnings, there is less room to discuss some of the problems that can arise from the ways trigger warnings are used. In particular, she told me that trigger warnings might give an onlooker a false perception of

trauma—that trauma always manifests a certain way. For this reason, some people preferred to use the phrase, "content warning," over "trigger warning." She said:

> There are really matters when I think they do more harm than good…. they give people this image of triggering that is false. And that doesn't mean that they're totally stupid or useless and should be immediately thrown away. I think having to be defensive about them removes the space to have more important discussions for me. –Rosie[42]

Already I have highlighted that much of this protocol centers on the idea that consent cannot be assumed but must be given, but one discussion group stands out in memory for invoking an alternative model of affirmative consent. About a dozen volunteers, myself included, were gathered on a Saturday morning to discuss some of the weaknesses of Pocketbooks as a safer space. Ten minutes or so into the discussion, just after a volunteer told us that a man on her shift had crossed a physical boundary of hers, we were interrupted by a tourist who asked if she could observe our meeting. In response, Zin, who was chairing the meeting, said to the group, "Please put your hand up if you are okay with the woman staying to observe." Relieved that I did not have to be the odd one out to say no, I kept my hand down, as did everyone else in the group.

Now, Zin's directive might seem commonplace at first glance, but his approach embodied several important aspects of affirmative consent. First, although Zin was a Collective member and moderator, he recognized that consent should be consensus driven- rather than top-down or assumed. Equally, if not more importantly, however, he flipped the typical power dynamic of refusing consent on its head. Rather than the onus being on those of us in the meeting to say "no," consent was assumed *not* to be given in the first place.

[42] Another volunteer added that trigger warnings can also too narrowly define what content is upsetting. They knew someone, for example, who was triggered by stuffed animals, something that most of us would not consider giving a trigger warning for.

Given that power differentials place the onus on the subordinated person to withdraw consent—to say "no"—affirmative consent alleviated some of that burden, which can seem immeasurable in pressurized situations. Moreover, affirmative consent does not encumber individuals with setting their boundaries because the *boundary* is assumed, rather than consent. Practices that model affirmative consent helped community members (like me) to collectively re-envision and practice alternative methods of affirming and boundaries. In fact, I took note of how Zin handled this situation—not for the purposes of this thesis, but in case I ever moderated a discussion and encountered a similar disruption.

The subject of boundaries could occupy a chapter in itself. But before concluding, it should be acknowledged that this culture of asserting and respecting boundaries, and of prioritizing compassion and autonomy over forced engagement, enabled people to heal from past trauma(s). Consider the following comments:

> I don't mean to sound alarmist or something, but I think that Pocketbooks is a crucial space. I think it is so important. I've had so many interactions with people, where I've been like, 'Fuck, this is why we're here.' Like last week, I had a really incredible interaction with someone who came in. They said, 'I just got a friend out of an abusive situation and am dealing with a lot of trauma myself. I need a book to read about it, and I knew that I could come here.' And they were talking about their experiences... I feel myself constantly on the verge of tears because of how much people bring to the space. I'm overwhelmed by how willing they are. She said, 'I knew that I could come because it was a safer space and these things would be treated with compassion.'… We're able to support that and to maintain that space of compassion. That's what this is about. —Ginny

> It's so important… I come from pretty marginalized background, and I spent a lot of years as a person with trauma built in my early years and my teenage years, spent a lot of years being negative and just self-destructive…. and Pocketbooks was the first time I saw a community where people, almost created this little microcosm of the world where they tried to be the change they wanted to be in the rest of the world and worked really hard to be kind to one another and work cooperatively with one another. And it was kind of amazing that this little project chugged along with all these people and this fluid way of doing things without a lot of rules or policies…And seeing more people coming in from high school and come back years later and say, Pocketbooks saved me, I would've been a different person if I hadn't found Pocketbooks. And I think Pocketbooks saved me, and I want to pass that onto the next people so Pocketbooks can save them, too. –Mariah

As these volunteers said, the culture fostered by the Pocketbooks community was not simply a theoretical or discursive exercise for the sake of creativity and critical thinking. For many people, this ability to take up space—and have that space respected—was therapeutic, life affirming, and even lifesaving. And although the safe space media discourse often emphasizes the necessity of resilience,[43] without healing, how can one survive?

(3) CHALLENGES AND CHANGE

(3.1) A NEW CIVILITY?: ACCESS AND PRIVILEGE

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, part of what enabled me to carry out fieldwork at Pocketbooks was my familiarity with safer space discourse prior to my volunteering. I had been immersed in similar spaces, so the vocabulary, practices, and underlying values at Pocketbooks were already familiar to me—or in Warner's words, I had been engaged in "preexisting forms and channels of circulation" (2002a: 106). This familiarity allowed me to integrate into the community and be seen as an insider, rather than an outside observer (like the woman who interrupted our discussion group on safer spaces). Within the CoP framework, it has been acknowledged that linguistic competence (of that particular community) has implications for whether people are considered "core" or "peripheral" members (see: Eckert and Wenger, 2005). In a CoP, "[l]egitimacy…involves not just having

[43] Resilience in these debates is often described as forced exposure to violence. Although I contrast resilience with healing here, the violence that Pocketbooks volunteers have endured and survived—and all the while maintain their hope and belief in a better world—demonstrates a kind of resilience that for most people would be unimaginable.

access to knowledge which is necessary for 'getting it right', but being at the table at which 'what is right' is continuously negotiated" (Eckert and Wenger, 2005: 583)

But for whom might these preexisting channels be out of reach and therefore limit their access to Pocketbooks? Who might be pushed to the periphery due to their socioeconomic or other circumstances? As I have illustrated throughout this chapter, the alternative forms of sociability performed at Pocketbooks need to be *learned*; they are radically different from the ways in which people interact in the dominant public. This means that "the construct of community practice 'politicizes' the concept of learning by locating it in a social context where the experience of participation—and therefore learning—is always a claim to competence" (Eckert and Wenger, 2005: 583). Who might struggle to (un)learn social practices and new language and experience yet another barrier to the space? One volunteer phrased this question:

> There's a particular etiquette, like the pronoun thing. It's a very unnatural thing for a lot of people. Who would be resistant to that kind of thing? Who wouldn't understand? –Sandra

It did not go unnoticed by the community that most volunteers were university students or graduates and were highly educated compared to the general population, nor that discussions were often overly intellectual. Consider the following observations and commentary by volunteers:

> I think we need our own language, but I think it can also be a way to exclude people who don't have a certain educational attainment. It can be, if we're using words without defining them or we're not on the same page on what they mean… I think the class thing is one of the ways in which we are most homogenous. –Sally

> So, I think class and educational attainment specifically is something that would be one of the stickiest issues, considering we are a bookstore, and we are explicitly uplifting the value of knowledge. The fact that we would fall into the trap of knowledge is formal educational attainment. It makes sense but we need to resist falling into that. –Niall

Age was another potential means of exclusion. One volunteer, who was in her final year of high school, said that younger people in the community might simply have less political knowledge than their older peers in the shop:

> And also, the language is so hard to learn. The point where I am now is because of years of me constantly learning. For people who come in and are saying bad things, it's not always because they mean to, it's because they haven't had the years of experience. And sometimes in safe spaces people forget that. Sometimes a thirteen-year-old doesn't know what 'affirmative action' means. –Jessica

People who were older said they were worried that younger people might be excluded because so many volunteers had—or were in the process of attaining—university degrees. One volunteer said:

> There are a few people who are in high school. This is also why the age thing is a problem. It is compounded by the fact that we all have college degrees, and they don't. And we're in an intellectual space. And the people that are younger are there for different reasons than those older. The younger are seeking refuge and are super vulnerable. A lot are trans, a lot are there because they don't have other spaces, have never had other spaces that are in any way safe for them. So, the fact that the rest of us normalize using terms and concepts and privileging things we've learned at college or grad school compounds that problem and that vulnerability.

Barriers were not only restricted to class and age; (dis)ability was another key factor that volunteers recognized, especially regarding neurodiversity (for example, people with learning differences and/or who are autistic). These issues rose to the surface in a meeting about Pocketbooks as a safer space. Several of us were attempting to raise awareness of how certain terms can be damaging despite being seen as normal elsewhere. In addition to pronouns, we discussed words like "crazy," "hysterical," or "psycho," for example—all of which have ableist and misogynistic connotations. Unexpectedly, one woman spoke up and politely shared that she was worried that she might not be using language correctly. She added that, being autistic, she sometimes struggles with language usage and reading people.

Despite wanting to respect others in the space, she said she might struggle to make language changes, and she was worried she might accidentally be "unsafe" to others.

There was a perceptible shift in the group's mood when she spoke up; the sympathy for this woman was palpable, as she was not the kind of person who would be seen as a risk poser by anyone in the group (or greater Pocketbooks community). Sally, who was acting as the moderator, paused and reassured her that Pocketbooks is a space for people like her, too, and that any kind of learning difference is something that should also be accounted for. She added that the concern was more about people who are *careless* with their language, rather than people who have genuine reasons they might not be able to easily alter their ways of speaking. Nevertheless, the trepidation in the woman's voice suggested that this new discourse and social practices might be exclusionary to people with learning difficulties, despite being people that the store aims to prioritize. Much in the way that a coded lock or racial profiling can be a point of access restriction, so, too can language—even language intended to be inclusive.

In response, volunteers scheduled another meeting to talk about "respectability politics," a phrase they invoked to criticize the potentially new form of civility surveillance that may emerge in places like Pocketbooks that invoke alternative social practices. Respectability politics is a set of beliefs and attitudes that moralizes certain ways of speaking and behaving, and which upholds standards that reify white supremacy, classism, and ableism. Although people I spoke to were vehemently against respectability politics because it might police people who lack this ability to conform, they nevertheless recognized it as a phenomenon in need of tackling within their own community.

Eckert and Wenger (2005: 583) write that CoP membership is not only granted by "competence" but can be gained by re-defining competence, too. Discussions surrounding respectability politics, can be framed in this way—as part of the process of negotiating what constitutes competence (or respectability), and whether competence even has a place in a safer space. Nevertheless, these conversations about "respectability politics" were by no means entry-level discussions; moreover, despite their good intentions, most of the people initiating these meetings were not those most harmed by respectability politics and issues of competency that arose in Pocketbooks.

(3.2) AN EVOLVING DISCOURSE: EXPERIMENTATION AND CHANGES

Although it might be tempting to reduce the social and discursive practices at Pocketbooks to specific conventions (like using pronouns, asking for consent, and so on), these practices were constantly being imagined, proposed, implemented, contested, and changed. In part, this is because public discourse changes, and therefore, the same convention can change meaning(s) over time. Consider, for example, the following comment by Gina, who was a middle-aged lesbian and has been coming to Pocketbooks since it first opened:

> Walking in is an education in itself, because immediately you find out what new things are going on. Even the language is changing so drastically. And there's all different kinds of new forms of study that are going on. Back when I was in school, we didn't have all the different lexicons and things, and in some ways it's off-putting because it feels like it's not my generation. But on the other hand, I can see how it does change the way people think, to talk differently. But it is interesting, because just the whole thing not using the pronouns him/her, it's interesting because when I was coming up, we used to say 'them' and 'they,' but we said that because we wanted to be vague so no one would know we were talking about a same sex partner. So that was, for us it was, it felt like a step backwards to go back to that. Whereas we were finally proud to say 'she' and 'her,' it took a lot of guts to say it. – Gina

As Gina's comment alludes to, the socially defiant practice of her youth was *not* to use gender neutral pronouns; however, now that mainstream gay rights are heralded in many dominant public discourses (even if doing so may be performative), referring to a same-gendered partner's pronouns is arguably less of a radical act than in decades prior. Because language is context-dependent and public discourse is always changing, linguistic conventions developed in counterpublics will inevitably evolve, shift, and take on new meaning(s) over time, too. As such, rather than understanding a safer space as a place where people can assert gender-neutral pronouns, it is more apt to conceptualize it as a place where language is wielded as a tool for contesting violent discourse.

That the discourse at Pocketbooks is ever-changing is built into a discursive arena that encourages self-reflexivity about violence, space, and everyday actions. More than anything, Pocketbooks cultivates a culture that encourages people to deconstruct social life and imagine alternatives—not only alternatives to dominant discourses and practices, but alternatives to those performed within their own counterpublic space. For example, I recall a staffer suggesting a color-coded system (red-yellow-green) for people to communicate their willingness to discuss or engage in conversations and/or take on certain responsibilities. Giving herself as an example, she said, "I am usually comfortable enough to say, 'I cannot have this conversation,' but sometimes it's just easier to say one word or a short phrase that communicates your needs." The system could work as follows, she suggested:

Ana: "Hey Cedric do you want to discuss the upcoming SSP?"

Cedric: "Red."

Ana: "Gotcha, let's talk about what to get for lunch."

She argued that such a system would emphasize the "importance of people expressing their feelings and needs without being imposing on others. Emotional labor should be reciprocated and recognize the limitations of others in meeting our own needs. We should also prioritize the community over ourselves." Although this suggestion was never put into practice (volunteers were "in favor of trying…to improve emotional communication," though, as one of them said), it nevertheless demonstrates the kind of creativity that emerges within a community oriented to imagining (and *performing*) alternative modes of sociability. Even when shortcomings may have seemed incommensurable, volunteers never abandoned hope to create safer alternatives.

CONCLUSION

Although trigger warnings, asking for pronouns, and speaking from first person are alternative social norms that tend to be presented in the dominant safe space discourse as random behaviors that stifle debate and intellect, as I have shown, they are practices that derive from and contribute to a feminist discourse on (anti)violence that seeks to redress its (often invisible) affronts. Despite public perceptions that safe spaces stimy growth, the stories that underpin this chapter are of both personal *and* intellectual growth (indeed, sometimes volunteers felt the community was intellectual to the point of being exclusionary along lines of class, ability, and age). These practices enabled marginalized people to share their stories and explore their identities—something that did not restrict conversation but opened space for new ones, and even expanded the horizon of possible subjectivities through which they could frame their lives and experiences. As was the case with feminist consciousness groups, participants were able to develop a more expansive understanding of

violence and a greater awareness of other identities and experiences, demonstrating both humility and courage in the process of addressing their own subconscious prejudice. This consciousness raising was not forged through discussion alone but by performing alternative sociability that both implicitly and explicitly critiques everyday violence.

While these practices cannot eliminate the (re)production of structural violence in everyday habitus entirely, embodying them nevertheless enables people to envision, negotiate, and encounter what a safer world might look and feel like, and in doing so, offer moments of reprieve. In a world where swathes of people suffer from violence, that experience is not trivial. As Mariah said, "I think Pocketbooks saved me, and I want to pass that onto the next people so Pocketbooks can save them, too."

INTERLUDE 6



Figure 8: On the left is a sign that reads, "You can't have a revolution if no one does the dishes," posted above the sink area for washing used cafe mugs and cutlery. In the middle hangs a sign with examples of counterfeit bills for volunteers to check bills against. Below is a handwritten drawing affixed to the wall behind the counter which reads, "There is no effort in the world that is not somehow beautiful, lifting heavy rocks, swimming an ocean, flying to the moon, loving you." On the right is the cartoon drawn by a volunteer, with the title, "A guide to subverting the collective process!"

One afternoon, I notice a new satiric cartoon strip has been affixed to the cubby behind the retail counter, located next to the computer where Collective members often work. The first frame reads, "A guide to subverting collective process!"—followed by several more frames that read, "Scoff at proposals made by other people," "Accuse others of

power hoarding," and "Act like you're in a hurry all the time." I mention the cartoon to my friend Taylor, who says, "Oh yeah, some of the volunteers copied it from *Come hell or high water* on my shift. Isn't it great?" I stifle a laugh. I cannot imagine it will do much to diffuse tensions within the community. Emotions have been flying high since a Collective member rejected a Staffer's suggestion to edit the Safer Space Policy, which has evolved into an impassioned debate about hierarchy and organizational practices in the space. And yet, the image captures what so many volunteers (myself included) have been feeling: frustration, defeat, and defiance all at once. Although I have not yet read the book, a volunteer has left a copy behind the counter "for volunteers to read on shift," which has pages marked with neon sticky tabs to indicate potentially "relevant" points. The full title reads, *Come hell or high water: a handbook on collective process gone awry.*

Later, I ask one of the Collective members who also works on my shift if she has read the book. She responds that it is "a bit too pessimistic" and right now she's reading *Hope in the dark* by Rebecca Solnit. It is not long before a copy of this book makes its way behind the counter, too. Around this time, I interview another Collective member who reads me a few passages from Solnit's book that chronicle the struggles of forging new paths in an unequal society and the incommensurable expectations that activists often have for one another. She reads, "Perfection is a stick with which to beat the impossible." She tells me that although Solnit can sometimes be "overly comfortable with allowing the ends to justify the means," she still "makes a fairly convincing argument that it's worthwhile." Thumbing through her saved passages, she continues:

> Moths and other nocturnal insects navigate by the moon and stars. Those heavenly bodies are useful for them to find their way, even though they never get far from the surface of the earth. But lightbulbs and candles send them astray; they fly into the heat or the flame and die. For these creatures, to arrive is a calamity. When activists mistake heaven for some goal

> at which they must arrive, rather than an idea to navigate Earth by, they burn themselves out, or they set up a totalitarian utopia in which others are burned in the flames. Don't mistake a lightbulb for the moon, and don't believe that the moon is useless unless we land on it. After all those millennia of poetry about the moon, nothing was more prosaic than the guys in space suits stomping around on the moon with their flags and golf clubs thirty-something years ago. The moon is profound except when we land on it. –Rebecca Solnit

Wiping a tear from her eye, she tells me that she is coming to our interview from an emotional place and that she is unsure if she will stay on the Collective for the sake of her wellbeing, despite having only joined a month ago. She is one of the Collective members I have always been fond of (despite not knowing her well), and yet, coming to this interview as a Staffer—at a time when the relationship between Staffers and Collective members has soured—I can feel the distance between us.

This is. And thou art. There is no safety. There is no end. The word must be heard in silence. There must be darkness to see the stars. The dance is always danced above the hollow place, above the terrible abyss.

— Ursula K. LeGuin*, The farthest shore*

CHAPTER 7 | NAVIGATING BY THE MOON AND STARS: INTRA-COMMUNITY DEBATES ON ORGANIZING SAFE PREFIGURATION IN AN UNSAFE WORLD

INTRODUCTION

Pocketbooks' Mission Statement reads, "Pocketbooks strives to empower our volunteer workers through non-hierarchy, cooperation, and collective-based decision making, providing an example of the society we are working toward." This idea of creating a micro-version of an ideal society, as I mentioned in Chapter 4, resonates with this idea of prefigurative politics whereby participants create "a future society at a micro level with the aim to instantiate radical social change in and through practice" (Törnberg, 2021: 87) and Cooper's (2013) "everyday utopia," a place that "work[s] by creating they change they wish to encounter, building and forging new ways of experiencing social and political life" (2013: 2). Although my foregoing ethnographic chapters represent different aspects of prefiguration, this chapter places prefigurative *organizing*—and the debates therein—at the forefront of discussion. By organizing, I refer to the processes by which participants imagine and implement organizational structures—the kind of systems or models created for the purpose of achieving the goals of the community.

In a safer space that embraces prefiguration, safety is not only the end goal but also the means to achieving it. Safety is not only the "hope…that keeps the utopic fire burning"

(Cavalcante, 2019: 1723) but also the value through which the space should be imagined, actualized, and negotiated. But what does safe prefiguration look like in practice, given that safety is a utopian impossibility (something participants implicitly and explicitly acknowledged in their preference for calling the space "safer" rather than "safe")? What are the possibilities and limitations in creating safe organizational structures, when the alternative social, spatial, and discursive practices that afford marginalized groups some experiences of safety in the first place must be maintained, when the shop exists within an unequal and capitalist society, and where efficiency in organization can make or break the shop's survival? In other words, what is the relationship between safety and organization, and what does safe prefiguration look like in an unsafe world?

This chapter follows participants as they debate these questions and considers the implications of this prefigurative discourse in conceptualizing Pocketbooks as a safer space. That is to say, I explore the "micro politics" (Ishkanian and Peña Saavedra, 2019: 986) or "back stage" (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood, 2017) work of "safe" prefiguration, which I define as the kind of intra-group dynamics at play in organizing a safer space. Rather than focusing on the ways in prefiguration takes shape at Pocketbooks (what the space looks like, sounds like, and so on), I focus on the ways in which participants debate how prefiguration *should* take shape, if at all. As Levitas (2013: 179) says of utopian spaces, "evaluation cannot be avoided"; moreover, the utopian is "a reflexive process, entailing continuous value-making judgements about what is desirable for better ways of being" (Sliwinski, 2016: 439). While all chapters have illustrated this valuative process, none do so more than this chapter. This is because although all aspects of safety are subject to community critique and debate, the question of how to organize the community was by far

the most contentious at Pocketbooks. For this reason, this chapter also spotlights the affective consequences of "the oscillating movement between imagining and actualization" (Cooper, 2013: 11)—especially when community members have different utopian imaginaries—and considers the implications of community tension and hurt that may arise in the process of creating a safer space.

Section 1 opens with a discussion about prefigurative politics and backstage debates in the context of counterpublics. Next, Section 2 follows the main conversations (and arguments) about safe prefiguration, including themes on transparency, confidentiality, participation, and survival. Finally, Section 3 explores some of the social consequences of community fallout while also reorienting the reader's gaze beyond the bookshop.

(1) Discussion: literature and ethics

(1.1) The role of prefigurative debates in counterpublics

Prefiguration means that actors "express the political 'ends' of their actions through their 'means,'" creating "'alternative' social arrangements or institutions" (Yates, 2015: 1). Additionally, prefiguration is premised on the idea that "progressive politics do not flow magically from aggrieved identities" (Chun et al., 2013: 937) but require intentionality and labor. While not all counterpublics are prefigurative in nature, as I have shown thus far, a safer space, which is premised on inclusivity, freedom from violence, and accessibility, cannot be achieved passively but requires active intellectual imagination *and* iterative implementation of those imaginaries. Prefiguration is inherent to producing a subaltern counterpublic like Pocketbooks that seeks to challenge the structures of domination that

would be (re)produced without actualizing alternatives (even if these alternatives cannot guarantee the total eradication of the structures of power it seeks to disrupt).

A challenge for a community like Pocketbooks is that prefigurative politics "produces its own hierarchies and forms of disciplinary power"; this tension may even be inherent to collective organizing (Ishkanian and Peña Saavedra, 2019: 987). For example, collective and cooperative-based organizational models may struggle with the issue of efficiency, especially if all workers have the right to participate (Hansmann, 1999); yet, to exclude some workers would undermine the premise of collectivity. Yates, for instance, writes about how participants of an autonomous social center in Barcelona, FUGA, regularly expressed frustration over the slowness of their political organizing, due to the time spent thinking from and through micropolitics; yet, their identification with micropolitics is how they distinguished themselves as activists (2015: 9). Sometimes, due to constraints and inefficiencies, cooperative groups may choose to move towards "the value-laden term 'degeneration,'" in which workers abandon "cooperative principles and…embrace…an organizational structure closer to the conventionalist capitalist model," perhaps due to financial incentives (Kennelly and Odekon, 2016: 171). Despite claims to inclusivity, some groups may still favor those who are most privileged and neglect other issues. Take, for example, Occupy Wall Street, which claimed to give voice to the 99%. Despite this claim to inclusivity, activists of color expressed that the movement lacked racial and class diversity. Some of these activists created a working group within OWS to address their needs and the movement's racism called "POCcupy" (Paye, 2012). Others chose to walk away and created political organizations that would better serve their needs and address the shortcomings of other movements (Paye, 2012).

Although (re)producing hierarchies is inevitable under prefiguration, built into this value system is the commitment to addressing and challenging hierarchies within a group's own organization (Ishkanian and Peña Saavedra, 2019: 989). This chapter is premised on the knowledge that "if we are to understand how social movements contest existing power relations and social inequalities, we must not only focus on their public actions, but also examine how they acknowledge and address inequalities within their own spaces and practices" (Ishkanian and Peña Saavedra, 2019: 997).

While it might seem contradictory for an activist group or movement to internally debate their aims (after all, moral attitudes and objectives usually *catalyze* political organizing), Wright (2012) has argued that internal counterpublic discourse is often a necessary first step for activists, who benefit from making their beliefs legible amongst themselves before making their concerns more public. Wright (2012) argues that "focusing the human megaphone inward to speak to the group rather than to the public at large—makes much more sense when we consider Nancy Fraser's belief that the subaltern counterpublic is important as a space for creating counter discourses among themselves prior to addressing others" (2012: 144). Sliwinski also writes that "utopia—instead of signifying perfectibility, inaccessibility, or impossibility—becomes apprehensible as a hopeful modality of engaging with, and in, the world" (2016: 432). As such, these prefigurative debates at Pocketbooks, which allow participants to "make their beliefs legible amongst themselves" (Wright, 2012: 144) can be framed as a way of "engaging with, and in, the world" (Sliwinski, 2016: 432) and as *part* of their transformative potential, not separate from it. Moreover, these internal "deliberative processes" provide an opportunity for participants to "speak out, assert themselves and challenge others…" (Reedy et al., 2016:

1077). While challenging others may sometimes result in community conflict, there is also an opportunity to create friendships and feelings of solidarity.

(1.2) METHODS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Many of the conversations surrounding hierarchy and prefiguration that I was involved in took place in long email threads on the Staffer/Collective listserv, meetings open to Staffers and Collective members, and more private but informal discussion groups (usually with Staffers and a few volunteers). While being privy to these conversations was undoubtedly crucial to my perception of the events unfolding and peoples' various perspectives, it did not sit well with me to detail the sequence of events and provide comprehensive information about how these debates unfolded. Several people encouraged me to "write whatever you want—be honest about what's happening"; however, given that I knew other people were sensitive about information sharing, I did not feel that it would be responsible to share anything and everything.

Nevertheless, the subject of hierarchy/prefiguration was what most Collective members and Staffers felt passionately about speaking in our interviews, and it was evident that these issues were shaping the direction the community would take in the future. As such, it was evident that I could not sidestep these discussions in my thesis (my ears are ringing with words from a professor of mine: "If it's what the people are talking about, that's what you have to write about!"). Although I was trepidatious in broaching these subjects with participants in interviews, I realized throughout the interview process that creating space for people to talk about these issues one-on-one, without interruption, was

cathartic for people; it enabled many of them to "take up space" that they felt unable to do in the thick of these debates. Additionally, even though within intra-community debates, I tended to side with people who were pushing for transparency and accountability (and therefore, related more to Staffers and ex-Collective members), having these open conversations with Collective members, too—which were not adversarial—allowed me to build closer relationships with them and be challenged, too. Speaking to people from all points of view—even volunteers who were less privy to some of these behind-the-scenes debates—widened my perspective and has enabled me to present multiple sides of the story in this chapter.

Given the ethical considerations about observation that I raised in Chapter 2, I have chosen to keep my observations and descriptions of events to the bare minimum. Where I do share events that unfolded, I do so because they were issues discussed by multiple participants in interviews and because I believe they are essential for discussing these prefigurative debates. I have anonymized the details of these events to make the individual actors participating in them as difficult to identify as possible. Additionally, instead of theorizing primarily around my observations, my interviews sit at the forefront of this chapter's conceptualization; every direct quote in this chapter was obtained in interviews. Where I summarize what people said in a meeting, I only share information that they later reiterated privately or shared with a more public email list; I did not share information that was intended only for a restricted audience.

Finally, I have added an additional layer of anonymity in this chapter. The reason that most people wanted anonymity in my thesis in the first place was to protect their identity regarding conversations about the shop's organization. Many people did not want to

be overly confrontational or seen as badmouthing certain individuals, even if they disagreed with them. Throughout this thesis, I have given individuals multiple pseudonyms. But in this chapter, I also create amalgamate characters. I have turned multiple Collective members into a composite character, who I call "Clara," and Staffers into a composite character, who I call "Molly." On the one hand, merging participants into one character might risk giving the impression that all Collective members and all Staffers shared a single point of view, respectively. While many people in the same worker position often did seem to be on one "side," they nevertheless expressed a variety of attitudes, and I do not want to suggest that they were a monolith. However, I worry that individualizing participants too much in this chapter risks making them identifiable (even with pseudonyms) or can come across as rehashing specific arguments between individuals. I do not wish this chapter to devolve into an argument about "good" and "bad" Collective members or Staffers; instead, I wish to discuss the varying points of view that were presented by *all* types of workers and the kinds of positions that were often attached to a person's position within the organizational structure.

Nevertheless, individual perspectives and experiences matter, too, so not everyone in this chapter is a composite character. "Ruby" is a pseudonym for one person, a Staffer and former Collective member, and "Elijah" is a pseudonym for a single Collective member. Both Ruby and Elijah were happy for their stories and interviews to be platformed, and I felt that their identities and experiences were crucial to understanding the perspectives they were sharing. In addition, I also refer to a variety of volunteers, former workers, and other Staffers in this chapter.

Ortner (1995) writes that "many of the most influential studies of resistance are severely limited by the lack of an ethnographic perspective" (1995: 173). Although navigating these ethical considerations was challenging, it is my hope that sharing the intricacies of prefigurative debates avoids the problem of ethnographic "thinness." By presenting these debates and acknowledging them as fraught, I pushback on the "sanitizing of politics" (Ortner, 1995: 176) and illustrate the ways in which even those who wish to resist structures of power also "have their *own* politics" (Ortner, 1995: 177). My decision to acknowledge internal conflicts in this chapter resists the tendency to romanticize resistance and social movement organizing.

(2) 'BACK STAGE' PREFIGURATION DEBATES: HIERARCHY, SAFETY, AND LIMITATIONS

(2.1) DEBATING THE VOLUNTEER WORKER STRUCTURE: ACCESSIBILITY AND HIERARCHY

This section follows participants as they debated whether a volunteer-based worker structure disrupts or reinforces systems of power—or, in other words, whether Pocketbooks' organizational structure prefigures safety or reproduces violence. A Collective member summarized the paradox that underlines an organizational structure dependent on unpaid workers in the following way:

> It's interesting, because on one hand, the volunteer structure makes the space available for different levels of commitment. I would never want us to just be a workers co-op because there's so much value in just expanding the space to people who only have the time to volunteer a few hours a week but still really want to be a part of the space, and I think it creates a sense of community… and you get a certain sense of transience of people coming and going, and it gives it new life and new ideas coming and going, and you never get stuck in one way of thinking… But on the other hand, it's not accessible to everyone especially

> financially. If you work full-time, it might be hard. Or if you're a student…it might be harder. –Clara, Collective member

The first part of Clara's comment highlights accessibility as desirable in an organizational model, something that the current volunteer structure allows for. Several volunteers affirmed this line of reasoning and shared that volunteering allowed them to gain valuable and marketable skills that could help them gain employment and potentially diminish the extent of their marginalization elsewhere. These kinds of comments were made from people who were on the more marginalized end of the volunteer spectrum (Black, queer, and/or transgender):

> Easily, I've gotten work experience. [Other employers] wouldn't let me get a retail job before, because I didn't have experience. Not that they didn't hire me, they didn't even call me back! Because they knew I didn't have any experience, because of my resume. Now I have experience. –Jason, Black intern, high school student

> I learned how to make coffee. It's a good way to get job experience in that way. The process of applying for a job is so high pressure, but people will vouch for you from here if you're applying somewhere. –Jamie, queer volunteer of color, high school student

> I'd never worked in a retail capacity before, so it was good to learn that as well. –Sydney, queer and non-binary volunteer

By providing a place to develop employable skills for those who may not have had a privileged upbringings, a volunteer-based organization—which does not select volunteers based on experience, knowledge, or skills—has the capacity to redress some of the access barriers to employability elsewhere. This point resonates with research conducted at a safe space for homeless people in Los Angeles; members' capacity for gaining employable skills contributed to the sense of it being a "safe" space and granted privileges to those systemically excluded from society writ large (see: Bullock et al., 2016: 179-180).

Nevertheless, several participants expressed their discomfort with unpaid labor, which they identified as a form of exploitation. Moreover, volunteer work might also act as an entry barrier to those who do not have time to work for free, participants told me; under capitalism, free time is a luxury.[44] Clara conceded, "Since we've gone to a volunteer model, it's a little bit inaccessible to everyone," and one volunteer added, "We're just not going to attract people who don't have that time"—not only the time it takes to do unpaid work but also to engage with the learning required to participate within the community. Two volunteers added:

> Because those people can afford to donate their time rather than actually be paid for their labor… I think it's important to keep in mind when we talk about inclusivity and accessibility. –Cedric, volunteer

> It's just difficult because to get involved in this community requires some form of privilege—and that can be met in different ways—but it requires some kind of economic privilege… So, I think that's one way in which it falls short [of being inclusive]. –Clara, Collective member

Thinking about access issues through an intersectional lens, one Staffer linked economic accessibility to race and class as well, elucidating Clara's comment about the ways in which privilege may factor into accessing Pocketbooks as a volunteer:

> I think it's definitely a predominately white space. And this is a really touchy conversation. Also, class. [Volunteering] takes a lot of time. Or interest, particular knowledge, and resources. And if you don't have all of that, you're not necessarily going to [volunteer]…We're just not going to attract the people who don't have that time. –Sonia, volunteer

[44] To complicate this dialogue, a few years after my fieldwork, one participant told me that, "Looking back, I'm way more okay with the labor issue (when no one was paid). The issue with exploitation is robbing one of the value they create, but this volunteered labor sent value into the intended space—the store."

As these comments highlight, time was perceived as a commodity necessary for entry to the community and was also acknowledged as not being universally available. Being white, educated, able-bodied, and affluent were several of the characteristics that participants associated with having the time to do unpaid work (or even feel empowered enough to take on the responsibilities associated with these roles). Additionally, as the following comments illustrate, time was perceived as a form of social capital that could confer *more* responsibility—and therefore more perceived *authority*—within the community. As participants shared, the amount of time one dedicated to the shop correlated to how many responsibilities one had; and the more responsibility one held, the more likely one was to be perceived as an authority figure, or to be confident to take the actions they so desired. One volunteer expressed her reservations about "circles of involvement" being considered non-hierarchical:

> At times it seems like we have these sort of circles of involvement in the space. And it's not supposed to be hierarchical, but having these sort of circles—volunteers, then Staffers, then Collective—yeah, in theory there's no hierarchy, but sometimes it definitely seems so. I hate to feel like I'm attacking any group or whatever, but it can definitely feel like the Collective, in terms of hierarchy, are above people. They're more involved, which is a great thing, but even there needs to be that sort of correspondence or transparency. –Karina, volunteer

A former Staffer reiterated Karina's point from the perspective of someone who feels like an authority figure within the community. She said:

> Again, it's a familiar thing. Even if [Collective members] don't talk to you, they've seen your face behind the counter enough, and if you put in the hours or whatever, people will feel more inclined to listen to you when you talk. And then it just it helps you be more confident. –Heather, former Staffer

Several participants questioned how best to wield their privileges (such as being university educated and financially stable) in ways to benefit the community without

reinforcing these hierarchies. If time is a commodity in which they are abundant, is it best spent in the shop—therefore reducing the workload of others—or kept to themselves, to make room for other participants? These comments resonate with the politics of "taking up space" that I outlined in Chapter 6. Consider the following three comments:

> Always a big concern of mine whenever I'm doing stuff at Pocketbooks is navigating coming from a place of relative privilege and trying to figure out how that fits into the scheme of the store… I have a lot of privilege in the sense that I have a great education, I came from a family that did not struggle for means, so I was well cared for and supported in my childhood. My opinions were listened to and that was great. Those things allowed me to access really strong employment, and I've never struggled for employment, which is also important. And my employment has allowed me to build really strong skills that benefit at Pocketbooks, things like accounting, project management, organization, things like that. So, I have really tried to figure out how to use my privilege to benefit the store. And I'm always happy to take stuff on recognizing that other people were struggling to find employment struggling with mental health issues, or struggling with a lot of the things that people struggle with when they are experiencing a life full of oppression. I can take those off peoples' plates. But I also don't want to take on roles that then push out people who have a deep tie to the mission of the store. I think, ideally, we should be promoting the leadership of people who experience oppression on multiple axes, and I never would want to take the place of somebody else. And that means consistently negotiating what that looks like. –Ruby, former Collective member

> I make a very solid salary as a software engineer, so money is not something I have to deal with in any serious way... I do not have skills that are sufficiently worthwhile to society to be making 100k a year, that's crazy. And I think that belief makes me more interested than I might otherwise be in giving away small skills in ways that I can, in ways that help people that are maybe less able to devote that time. –Molly, Staffer

> I have the time and energy to dedicate to Pocketbooks, but that's an enormous privilege. But where is the line between, this is a valuable way I can use that privilege and… I feel like I have so many questions about how do you leverage [privilege] to open up the floor wider? And I feel like being on the Collective and keeping this space open is a way to do that, but am I taking away the space from someone else? How do you not take up too much space? –Clara, Collective member

Borrowing Solnit's (2005) metaphor from the opening vignette of this chapter, I find it helpful to recast the "moon and stars"—in this case, safety and non-hierarchy—as navigational tools rather than a landing point. Participants did not conclusively settle prefigurative paradoxes over accessibility, pay, privilege, and authority. What they *did*

demonstrate, however, was a capacity for critical thinking about the nature of time and resources under capitalism, for self-reflexive thinking about their roles within unequal systems (including grappling with privilege), and a raised consciousness about how (in)accessibility manifests both within organizations and society more broadly (including how systems of oppression overlap). In striving for utopia (e.g., safety)—and by attempting to actualize imaginaries—participants brought about a conceptually rigorous discourse about forging justice in an unjust world.

As Solnit (2005) cautions, when a goal becomes a destination, the potential for burnout, pain, and exhaustion intensifies. This is also the case when actors within the same organization have different expectations for what their goal(s) should be, including what the utopian imaginary is and the extent to which it should (or can ever) be realized. As it becomes evident throughout the rest of this chapter, sometimes the affective consequences of engaging in this discourse lead to disappointment, frustration, and people even abandoning the organization in which they had once invested their aspirations, hopes, and labor. What does it say about a safe space if some participants feel like the attempt to prefigure safety is a dangerous act? These questions are especially salient in the proceeding sections about access to information and decision making, topics that generated a considerable amount of intra-community disagreement and fallout.

(2.2) Negotiating access to information: knowledge, power, and safety

To what extent should information be shared and to what extent should it be kept amongst a select group of people? Does prefiguring safety translate to transparency or

confidentiality? These questions preoccupied the minds of Pocketbooks workers and were especially pressing for but not limited to Collective members and Staffers.

Several participants highlighted that in the absence of a clearly defined structure, access to information (or, knowledge), acted as a mode of power. Consider the following two comments:

> I think in an organization that is technically not hierarchical, power acts as access to information and access to decision making. –Ruby, former Collective member

> The phrase 'non-hierarchical' is fake as fuck. So fake. As long as there's information that not everyone has access to, there's inherently power. –Zelda, former Staffer

Several workers said that the onus should be on those with more knowledge (and thus, power) to share that commodity, rather than on those who lacked it to speak up and ask for information. The act of withholding information, many participants said, was a means of perpetuating hierarchy within the community. As such, the key issue that participants identified was not that certain people had more knowledge and information than others, but that they did not make the information they had freely accessible to others. A few workers articulated this point in the following ways:

> There's definitely a group of people that have more responsibility and knowledge of the space. How much of that is people not taking initiative and how much of it is the Collective being closed off? This is why it's interesting hearing Staffer complaints, because I feel so out of the loop. That's a problem. There's not enough communication within the community—plans the Collective are making, between volunteers and Staffers, etc. It shouldn't be so, 'You didn't ask.' Since they've taken on more responsibility than everyone else, we need to know what they're doing. –Hannah, volunteer

> [In my role], I can work on access to information. And you see in these recent emails that people will try to manipulate, or not share things that have happened in the past as a way to feel power for themselves and make it like an outsider thing. Like [implying], 'You're too new, you don't know what's going on.' And by refusing to share things that have happened in the past, it exacerbates these kinds of hierarchies. And in a way, by not intentionally sharing that information it perpetuates hierarchy. –Ruby, former Collective member

In the last few months of my fieldwork when I carried out the bulk of my interviews, I learned that most volunteers did not even know who the Collective members were. Many volunteers could recite a few of their names but could not connect them to any particular face. This news was unsurprising, given that it took me several months of *intentionally* trying to seek them out before I had a feel for who the key players in the shop were. While Staffers had a better grasp of who comprised the Collective, they nevertheless said that they felt excluded from the most important behind-the-scenes conversations and decision-making processes, such as minutes from Collective meetings, discussions about the Safer Space Policy, and even the shop's finances.

After feeling as though Collective members had been deliberately withholding information from others to uphold their position(s) of authority within the community, Staffers (who first met a few times on their own) decided to bring the issue to a meeting with Staffers and Collective members. The agenda point was labeled, "Clearly defining/reviewing what info we agree can be shared between Collective/ Staffers/ Vols, and reflecting on a more effective means of communication between Collective and Staffers." What followed was a debate about access to information and safety.

In response to Staffer concerns about the lack of transparency (most of which were encapsulated in the aforementioned quotes), Collective members made several appeals (implicitly and explicitly) to safety. What was up for debate was not whether the organization should be safely prefigured but what constitutes safe organizing in the first place. For example, Clara expressed concerns about people who might be "infiltrating" the group, using this fear as a rationale to limit access to information. Although her reasoning might sound like a paranoid fantasy, the shop *did* have a few undercover police officers

during the height of BLM protests, so her worry was not totally unfounded. Moreover, she said that she did not want to post their names and photographs anywhere, even though it might help other workers identify them, because they were worried about former abusers or police officers having easier access to information about them (some members in the community felt they may be of interest to law enforcement because of other work and/or activism). Additionally, Collective members, who were often overworked as it was, communicated feelings of overwhelm and burnout. Exasperated and on the verge of tears, they said that writing anonymized minutes was another task they simply did not have time for. Clara said that "Collective minutes can be sent out only once we have worked together to find a way to do so *safely*" (my emphasis).

Ruby expressed sympathy with the Collective's predicament but added that she did not think their reasons were valid for withholding meeting minutes:

> Any organization that has meetings that they have to publish meetings for, when there's something confidential, you don't publish that part. And like the arguments that [two Collective members] use to say they shouldn't have to do that are not valid, and I think it's just because they're feeling very insular and paranoid. And I think they're just not great places, and they find a lot of support from one another, so anything asked of them that don't want to do, they retreat… I understand, to some extent. When I was on the Collective, I felt totally underappreciated and overworked. And it does feel like Staffers ask for more and more without giving. –Ruby, former Collective member

Molly, who took an interest in cryptography and online privacy activism, said that although they understand the need for privacy and secrecy in some organizations, the information at Pocketbooks is simply not that sensitive. They said:

> Unless we're working in super clandestine conditions and we can't write things or we're being surveilled and can't leave a trace, writing things is super important for values like accountability and transparency. –Molly, Staffer

The unstated questions underscoring this conversation were: In an unsafe world—in which there *are* people who seek to harm those such as those who work at Pocketbooks—to what extent can information be shared (and hierarchy be mitigated) without compromising peoples' safety? Are some forms of exclusion necessary for security (a "fortress" mentality), a theme that features heavily in anthropology of securitization (see, for example: Low, 2003)? Moreover, when the workload is high in the first place and workers are unpaid, what can reasonably be expected from workers to ensure access to information?

Some of us had our opinions about the relationship between transparency and safety affirmed through experience, as was the case for me personally. It began when I met with a worker who I had become friends with during first few months of my fieldwork. He stopped volunteering without saying goodbye, and a few weeks after he had last been on shift, he asked if I wanted to get dinner with him. Hoping to catch up and interview him, I agreed. Unbeknownst to me, he had been banned from the shop for making unwanted sexual advances on a volunteer and for alleged sexual assault. Unfortunately, I only learned about these allegations a few days after going to dinner with him from my friend, Molly, who was always in-the-know about ongoing matters and information normally withheld from Staffers. In the case of the former worker I met up with, Collective members agreed that the allegations should be kept confidential, in part because the person who made the allegations did not want word to get around. Nevertheless, without having access to this information, I was left in a vulnerable situation that could have otherwise been avoided.

In the absence of formalized communication channels, gossip[45] emerged as a method of redistributing information. By "gossip" I do not mean the sharing of salacious information for entertainment purposes but the sharing of information with trusted friends that might be otherwise inaccessible to those people. Although my situation was by no means pleasant, and I wish I had been told this information sooner (ideally from the Collective member who withheld this information from me and worked on shift with us), this gossip fostered a sense of trust between Molly and me; as such, it helped provide some feelings of ontological security in an organization where I did not always feel safe. Even if transparency was not a feature of the organization more broadly, knowing that there was *someone* who would share information with me—and with whom I could be honest, too—was enough to make me feel protected and as though I belonged to the community. These friendships (and the "gossip" that helped solidify these relationships), in some ways, acted like micro safe spaces within an organization that was, at times, tumultuous, non-communicative, and opaque.

At the end of one of our Staffer meetings, we left with the following "action item": "Take the month to answer the following questions: What does transparency mean to you? What does trust mean to you? How can we build more trusting relationships between Staffers and Collective members?" Although trust was identified as an essential starting

[45] Gossip has been a subject of anthropological enquiry for some decades now. Gluckman (1963), for instance, argues that "gossip is the blood and tissue of community life" and serves to "maintain the unity, morals and values of social groups" (1963: 308). Others have shown that gossip can act as a tool of resistance because it keeps people aware of the ways in which they are being exploited (Raj, 2019). Drawing from ethnographic research on the Zapatista movement, Lagalisse (2013) describes gossip as a "backstage activity" (that is often "pejoratively dismisse[ed]" by men (2013: 113) but which can act as a form of direct action; it becomes a tool of anti-authoritarian intervention in spaces that are ostensibly horizontal but fail to exemplify egalitarian politics. Lagalisse (2013) adds that communication—"gossip" included— is "crucial to the constitution, creation, or consolidation of the power of publics" (134).

point for increasing transparency and removing barriers to sharing knowledge, building trust is not a trivial task. Unfortunately, for many participants, any hope for building trust was extinguished over a debate about editing the Safer Space Policy—a conflict that was a turning point for many participants to leave the community entirely as people's faith in each other deteriorated even further.

(2.3) Decision making, participatory gatekeeping, and community fallout

The ability to be involved in decision-making processes was another subject of the community's prefigurative discourse. Should decision making be restricted to a small and "trusted" group of people to ensure that the "safest" decisions are made, or does this exclusivity reinforce power imbalances and thus diminish the worth of a safer space, which is premised on disrupting unequal structures?

Ruby said that this question was becoming more central to conversations at Pocketbooks because as Staffers gained more knowledge of the shop, the community, and its procedures, they also felt more empowered to be involved in making decisions. She said:

> There used to not be Staffers. It was just Collective members and volunteers, but Collective members had way too much work. They were sleeping in the store because the Collective was doing all the projects and staffing all the shifts, and just having volunteers was not enough. So, 'Staffers' was a role created to take some of that pressure off the Collective. And for the past couple years, there's been a huge push to push work off the Collective and on to Staffers and project bottom-liners to share the workload and make it more sustainable, to give people access to a role they feel connected to in the space. But the counterpart to that is that Staffers & project bottom-liners feel empowered to make their opinions known about other things. And the Collective can't have it both ways. –Ruby, Staffer and former Collective member

The question regarding the extent to which non-Collective members should be allowed to participate in decision-making processes erupted into a seismic argument—which resulted in irreparable community fallout—when Ruby suggested that the Safer Space Policy be edited. In an email thread in which Staffers and Collective members were discussing printing the policy on larger paper (so that it would be more visible), Ruby said offhand that it might be worth updating the policy, since it had not been edited in years. In her email, Ruby wrote that this was a good opportunity to make the policy "more clear and robust" and suggested discussing possible updates at our next Staffer meeting. In one example, Ruby noted that although the policy defines oppressive behavior, it does not explicitly say people should not *exhibit* oppressive behavior. Moreover, she said that some points in the policy were too vague, and she would like to see something about "how Pocketbooks approaches violations of the policy/ accountability/ restorative justice." Her proposals were modest, but she said a few tweaks might make the policy better reflect the community's attitudes and expectations.

Much to her surprise, Ruby's proposal was met with an "onslaught of emails" (Ruby's words) from Collective members saying that the policy should not be edited. Clara responded that she was against re-wording the policy; she described it as "a very political act" and said that it should not be an expedited process. Moreover, Clara said that Collective members must be involved in any edits or rewriting of the policy, and that it could not be done without them overseeing the process. Clara's justification was that survivors rely on safer space policies, and that it could be dangerous for survivors if the policy is rewritten by people who only want to be part of this conversation "part-time" (compared to Collective

members who are committed to a longer-time engagement with the shop).[46] She added that the policy has never before been rewritten by Staffers—only ever by Collective members—and that it should say that way to protect survivors.

Many participants felt that Clara's implicit (and sometimes explicit) claims to "safety" were being used to gatekeep and delay—tactics that institutions are often charged with by those who seek to challenge their power. In this case, many participants felt as though Clara had co-opted phrases related to safety for her own benefit, as a mechanism for exclusion under the guise of goodwill. Molly called Clara's use of emotive language "manipulative." She said:

> A lot of [Clara's emails] struck me as kind of manipulative.... It's not that I don't understand a lot of things she's writing about in those long emails, but I think sometimes she uses the language of safer spaces to demand emotional labor from the community.... I didn't understand why she was so against discussing the Safer Space Policy... her point basically seems to be to stop this conversation because all [she's] saying is not let's rush this problem. But literally no one mentioned rushing it. – Molly, Staffer

Molly added that it was difficult to challenge Clara because she and other Collective members value emotional language over other forms of communication. This dilemma speaks to the previous chapter and to conversational protocol. Although speaking from first person and platforming personal experience allows marginalized people to participate more freely and to be heard, it can also place pressure on people to engage in emotional work they do not wish to. Ruby reiterated Molly's point:

[46] Collective members were expected to spend at least 12 hours on shop duties every week, but it often amounted to more; they were also usually on the Collective for at least a year or two, if not longer. Staffers were only obligated to spend 6 hours on shift, by contrast. Nevertheless, many Staffers worked considerably more hours than that and had already worked in the shop for several years (often longer than many Collective members, as one Staffer pointed out to me). Many of them were also former Collective members, too. As such, the distinction between "part-time" workers and others is not a fast-and-hard line between Collective members and all other workers.

> I also think there's huge issue of what types of language are considered to be valid. So, a big challenge… is that Clara only considers emotional language valid. And it seems like if I want to push forward something because I think it's a good idea, objectively, that isn't considered valid. And it's only considered valid when people have strong emotional responses to something. And it's led me to feel really stuck, where I'm like, 'Do I need to write a huge email about all of my emotions in order for my voice to be considered?' And I think it kind of goes back to safer spaces stuff. Pocketbooks wants to be a space where people can talk about their emotions, and I understand that that type of language is so silenced in workplaces regularly, so we want to prioritize making sure there's space for that. But that doesn't mean it's the only type of language that should be considered valid…. I feel emotional labor to be exhausting… and I think right now, due to who's on the Collective, they're really prioritizing emotional labor, not task labor, and they're not considering the ways emotional labor is draining. Like, they'd never ask anyone to do this extra kind of task labor, but in a way, they're assuming people should do this kind of emotional labor without asking if people want to be doing that. –Ruby, Staffer and former Collective member

Moreover, although everyone I spoke to agreed that the policy is important for survivors, several volunteers and Staffers said that this was precisely why they wanted to be *involved* in the process. As survivors themselves, they did not want the policy to be written on their behalf; moreover, they felt like Clara was centering herself to exclude the voices of others who ought to be heard, too.[47] Molly said she felt like she would have to "out" herself as a survivor to have a legitimate claim to the conversation, reiterating the point that Clara's emails demanded "emotional labor." Molly said:

> This is something where I want to tread carefully and understand her position, because she's like, 'We need to support survivors, as well, and I'm a survivor, and I'm like, 'Okay, can you be more explicit about what that would mean to create a safer space for survivors?' But that's not what she was writing. She was like, 'I'm a survivor, you need to consider me and what I want, and what I want is to stop this conversation.'...You don't speak for all survivors! And you're not asking for input for other survivors, and you're behaving like you're the ultimate representative of survivors...That whole thread was just very confusing. –Molly, Staffer

[47] One participant said part of the problem was that the Collective at this time was predominately white and cisgender, so the Collective itself represented some of the worst of exclusionary, white feminism.

Ruby, who made the initial proposal to amend the policy said she was baffled by Clara's response and had not anticipated that what she perceived to be a modest suggestion would result in such profound community fallout. She told me:

> I was very surprised and very confused about how this whole conversation has been going. In 2014, when we talked about revising the policy, we were like, 'Let's talk about it at a Staffer meeting.' We were like, 'Here's some changes we wanted to make, we made some adjustments.' Everyone felt good about them, sent it to Staffers, nobody had any feedback, and we just adopted that policy. It was that simple. And I had that unspoken assumption that that's what would happen again this time. And clearly that is not what's happened. I think that Staffers absolutely should have a say in the policy because we are the ones who maintain it day to day and in the store, like duh, and that's a primary responsibility of Staffers is to uphold that policy when you're on shift. – Ruby, Staffer and former Collective member

She added that part of the issue may have been down to the individuals on the Collective and their mental health. Nevertheless, she said that, by making claims to "safety" (Clara said she felt "unsafe" in these conversations), they deliberately deflected criticism:

> I will say that this type of insular paranoid thinking is something I've never seen before from the Collective, and that seems to be like individual Collective members are not in a great space mentally about stuff that's going on at Pocketbooks and feeling very defensive and attacked. That is, I feel like they are using a structural argument about the role of the Collective members and Staffers to avoid admitting the true problem. And in terms of the structural stuff, I mean, have you read 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness?' I highly recommend it, it's very good, it was written back in the 70s during women's lib. The idea is that when you have organizations that refuse to have a structure, instead power accumulates through social capital. But because it is not named, it is even more insidious than an actual stated hierarchy. And I feel that is a huge issue that is happening at Pocketbooks.
> –Ruby, Staffer and former Collective member

While I most closely identified with Ruby's perspective and that of other Staffers during the time of my fieldwork (as a Staffer myself who often felt excluded from participating), in every debate there is another side, another viewpoint, another perspective, which I consider in the next section. While a safer space "brings the utopic into view" (Cavalcante, 2019: 1723), it also brings it under scrutiny. To what extent should utopic

imaginaries be actualized when there are limitations to realizing them, and what if there is more than one imaginary of "safety" in the first place? I now turn to Collective members, Clara and Elijah (a transgender, queer, and disabled Collective member).

(2.4) RETHINKING THE GOAL: PREFIGURING SAFETY IN AN UNSAFE WORLD

After several months of back-and-forth within the community about hierarchy in the space, participants found themselves asking questions not just about what safe prefiguration should look like (and how the community can better organize themselves), but whether prefiguration is a safe (and/or) realistic goal in the first place. Given the community's limitations to horizontal organizing—such as finances, availability of people's time, the cost of emotional labor, fears about violence, and burnout—should the community's goal even be to create a non-hierarchical structure? Clara asked whether it is possible to be radical in a stratified society, especially when the shop depends on capital in the first place:

> How can we be radical and still be a business? How do you resolve that? How can we be a business and still be radical? This is the paradigm. Everyone knows how to run a business.... But do we know how to do both? Can we be both? –Clara, Collective member

Several participants questioned whether creating a non-hierarchical structure is viable in an unsafe world, in which the costs (material and otherwise) are so high. One Collective member argued that Pocketbooks cannot spend its time experimenting with organizational practices because it is a lifeline for some people; therefore, the priority should not be horizontal organizing per se but creating a space where people can simply *be*—something akin to an "autonomous [space] in which to breathe" (Jones, 2013: 3). Two Collective members said the following:

> [Pocketbooks is] not to be ripped apart like some ideological experiment. This isn't Zizek's playing field, this is real people. –Clara, Collective member

> There are so many issues, but the biggest issue for me is that a lot of people who are trying to... I don't know... that are treating this like [a thought experiment] ... are people that come from backgrounds of privilege and don't need this space and have said on multiple occasions that 'this space would survive without me,' that 'I'm going to move on to my next project.' Whatever, they treat this store as a social experiment, as something that should prioritize ideological purity. They say that this needs to be 'more horizontal' or 'more anarchist' rather than prioritizing the fact that other people need it way more than they do, which is what's really frustrating to me. I see others that need it the way that I have and still do, kind of being denied the place that I used to have because people are just not seeing it anymore—not seeing how important it really is. Yeah, which is the biggest difference for me...that there are people just with a lot of privilege in the rest of the world kind of belongs to... in some ways, you know, Pocketbooks still is a place for them, but I don't know. It's kinda like what Gabrielle said at the Safer Spaces Forum a few weeks ago where she was like 'it used to be that men were considered a guest in the space.' It was not a right, it was a privilege, to be here. I feel the same way. People that can walk out on the street and they'll be fine. They can find somewhere else, and they don't really rely on the space. To me, that's really the priority of the store. –Elijah, Collective member

Elijah added that the risks become even greater in a gentrifying location like the Lower East Side, where other shops have not been able to survive increasing rent prices. With the greater pressure of needing to efficiently run a bookstore, other priorities—like horizontal organizing—should be put on the backburner. They added:

> Also, just in terms of the space itself, just acknowledging the history [is important]. It was never intended to be an anarchist space. It was intended to be a feminist bookstore. People having to reconcile the fact that we run a bookstore in hyper-gentrifying NYC, we can't be toying around with horizontalism. If it's not working, then we need to stop pushing it. Because if we close because people are angry that we're not horizontal enough, fuck you. We can't go there. That was never the goal, that was never the intention. –Elijah, Collective member

Clara, who felt drained by the conversations to change the community's organizational structure, said that she sought counsel from a former Collective member, who reiterated that it was her duty to protect Pocketbooks. As such, survival became yet another justification for asserting some level of authority. The former Collective member said to her:

> ‘Everyone has authority over their own body. And you are the protectors of the body that is Pocketbooks. And if you guys feel unsafe and leave, then there’s no space for anyone. This is not a space to fuck with.’ [The former Collective member] was taking it really personally. They were like, ‘No one’s allowed to fuck with Pocketbooks like this. This is a game for some people, and this is not a game. Some people really fucking need that space like their life depends on it. You go back there and get it together.’ –Clara, sharing advice from Ollie, former Collective member

Elijah also probed what safe organizing looks in an unequal society. If structures of power permeate all spaces—the bookstore included—then should *those* structures be the ones through which power dynamics are evaluated within the bookshop, rather than its organizational model? He said:

> I think we’ve kind of reached a point where some people are kind of not checking their privilege at the door, just being like, ‘When I walk in here, we’re all equals.’ And I’m just like, ‘That’s not how that works.’ Power dynamics and privilege dynamics walk into this space, and there is no way that there is a scenario in which a cishet[48] white man who is a volunteer or a Staffer or whatever has less power than me as a mentally ill, mixed [race], queer, trans person. Like there’s no way, it just doesn't work that way. As a Collective member, the power dynamic of Collective member to volunteers and Staffer just does not in any way equate actual social and systematic oppression. I don’t know, I'm at the place where I feel like people are starting to equate the two and it’s really dangerous. It’s taking this thing away that’s really important and necessary in my life, just because they can. And that's scary to me, because it’s like of all the places where I thought this would not happen is happening here… —Elijah

Elijah added that not only was the physical space life changing for him and so many people for providing a haven they could attend in person, but also that the experience of taking on responsibilities, such as co-owning the bookshop, greatly improved his life and self-esteem after being rejected in so many other social, work, and academic spaces. He added:

> Yeah, and in so many ways providing a physical place for people to go if they don’t have a home or a place to go, or if they need to not be in their home…There’s no other universe in which I can be a co-owner of a bookstore. There’s no way, except for here. And I’m kind of

[48] “Cishet” refers to someone who is cisgender and heterosexual.

> still in shock every day. I'm just so lucky that I have this opportunity to do this. Because no one else gets this. A lot of my friends are just like, 'How the fuck did you manage this?' And I'm just like, 'I don't know. I don't know.' –Elijah

He questioned whether horizontality looks like equal participation amongst all participants in a community, or instead, uplifting those with the greatest experiences of marginalization so that they can get closer to an equal footing. He described a cartoon that depicts the difference between equality and equity, with one frame for each, to illustrate his point. In both frames, there are three people—a tall adult, a medium-height child, and a small toddler—who are attempting to look over a fence to watch a baseball game. The "equality" frame has these three people standing on the same sized box, which leaves the toddler unable to see over the fence, the child barely able to see over it (and looking uncomfortable), and the adult easily watching the game. The "equity" frame, by contrast, shows these people standing on different height boxes so that they all have the same vantage point over the fence.[49] Elijah said that it would be better to model Pocketbooks on equity rather than equality, but that other workers were attempting to prefigure equality instead. In describing this image, Elijah implicitly provoked a consideration of the following question: Does a safe prefigurative model look like an organizational structure in which all members participate equally, or one in which marginalized members participate *more* than others? This idea of equity over equality, as illustrated in this cartoon and emphasized in Elijah's personal experiences, proposes an alternative "safe" imaginary to the horizontality model implied by many other participants (Staffers and volunteers especially).

[49] As someone else pointed out to me, this image often comes up with a third frame, which depicts "liberation" (where the fence, symbolizing systemic injustice, is removed entirely).

Additionally, Elijah pushed back on the idea that other Collective members using emotional language were manipulative. On the contrary, he argued that more privileged people were co-opting the kind of language produced by a safer space. He said:

> Sophia said this really great thing, where the cishet men or whatever... they haven't changed, they've just learned our language, and they've learned our rhetoric, and they're using it against it. And I really feel like that is the case. They get us talking in circles… it's so hard to refute that because they're using your language against you and it's absolutely terrifying. It's really fucking scary because I don't know what to say to you, because you know what I'm going to say next. It's so freaky. So, to have that here… sometimes I just have existential crisis. Is there nowhere that's safe? But I think we can get back to it, it's just going to take a lot of work. –Elijah

Several volunteers, Staffers, and former Collective members said that it would be better to acknowledge hierarchies and name them, rather than to set people's expectations up for disappointment. While most participants I spoke to still felt as though more could be done to increase community access to information and decision making, they also felt that it would be better to name and render more visible the hierarchies within the shop. Consider the following comments:

> I think claiming an attempt to be non-hierarchical is detrimental to the space because hierarchies emerge naturally, just in the course of relationships, especially, and one that is a business. And so those hierarchies have to be named and understood so they can be checked and in balance. But the issue is when there's this claim of, 'Everything is purely lateral hierarchy wise,' that's the issue…then the people who do have more power are able to do so…it's easier for them to hold onto that power because it's not named. When there's any discussion of them having it is like, 'We don't.' And it's like, well that's hard to argue. It's this circular argument. –Brianna, Staffer

> I don't think egalitarian is necessarily the right way to go. I think it would be better to name these structures, have some more structured definitions of duties and responsibilities for certain positions… because not everyone wants to give the same amount to this space. –Monica, volunteer

As this section has highlighted, although this discourse about safe prefiguration resulted in conceptual conversations about how to prefigure safety, what safety looks like in

an unsafe world, and whether safety should be prefigured, it also resulted in some emotional fallout. This can be seen in the emotive language used in participants' comments throughout this chapter, which is often charged, confrontational, and reliant on expletives. As I unpack in the next section, however, even though these fallouts had some negative consequences and resulted in some people leaving the community, these debates and discourses—as well as the friendships and skills forged in the process of attempting to actualize safe imaginaries—were other ways of engaging with and in the world.

(3) AFTERMATH

(3.1) COMMUNITY FALLOUT, DIRECT ACTION, AND NEW DIRECTIONS

The aftermath of the initial argument about editing the Safer Space Policy and the ensuing disagreements about the community's organizational structure were messy. In a final attempt to deescalate the situation and engage in productive conversation, a mediator stepped in to facilitate meetings and ensure better dialog amongst community members. However, even those meetings resulted in people being frustrated with the mediator and in debating the politics of "neutral" settings for mediation. Several people refused to be in the same room together. Some people were labeled "unsafe"—a value-laden insult in a safer space. Other, more private lines of communication were formed to discuss how to remove certain individuals from the Collective. Suffice it to say that, although I am withholding some of the details of this situation to protect people's anonymity and to not rehash emotive experiences, this debate about participation in decision making turned hostile to the point where people felt the need to leave the community for good. Several Collective members

contemplated leaving the Collective (eventually, some did); other Staffers also contemplated leaving (many of them did leave, too).

Nevertheless, participants found creative ways of navigating these conversations even when tensions were at an all-time high. When it was difficult to engage directly in conversations about the shop's organization, books acted as a kind of proxy for engaging in ideological warfare (or, in gentler language, ideological debates). Although most people did not actually read *Come hell or high water* or Solnit's *Hope in the dark*, people nevertheless expressed affinity with one book or the other to signal political (and thus, sub-community) allegiance. To say which book you preferred or were reading was a way of communicating whether you believed that people were hoarding power and impeding collective processes (these people identified with *Come hell or high water*) or whether you felt expectations were too high and that the community was doing its best (*Hope in the dark* was the identifier). As such, book affiliation became a way to make legible one's ideological position to others and as a means for identifying like-minded people. The sense of camaraderie and solidarity forged amongst those who identified with a similar book also meant that people with more similar viewpoints not only become friends but collaborate on future activist projects. Several of the people in the *Come hell or High water* camp remain friends to this day and have launched new organizations together, including projects pertaining to self-defense, cyber security, and animal rights.

Farewell emails were also a prominent fixture of this "era" and acted as a form of direct action. Often, when someone would leave Pocketbooks (e.g., stepping down from the Collective), they would send a farewell email which explained their reasons for departure. At first glance, these emails were grievance letters that allowed people to freely express their

emotions and openly criticize the community. One Collective member, Malik, who was critical of other Collective members' approaches to organizing, questioned if the community had lost sight of what mattered in his farewell email:

> What happened to having radical, prefigurative politics?
> What happened to searching for progress?
> What happened to working on a project and taking breaks when necessary, and not using a project as a way to further one's social capital and increase self esteem at the expense of the welfare of others and the store itself?

He added:

> Pocketbooks is not a model for radical spaces. Its success comes from its ability to dodge hard questions and appeal to a growing clientele of people in positions of privilege.
>
> We should ask ourselves again:
> Pocketbooks is a safe space, but for whom?
> Is progress simply waiting for the storm to pass?

Upon further reflection, however, these emails served a greater purpose than airing grievances alone. Although Collective members and Staffers usually reserved organizational debates to the Staffer email list, these farewell letters were typically sent to the volunteer-wide email list. Rather than serving to speak to those closest to the issue at hand, these emails functioned as widening the conversation to the rest of the community. Putting aside the content of these letters for a moment, we can see that they were used to disseminate information more widely and invite people into a conversation that they might not otherwise have been privy to. The mere act of sending a blast email to the whole group was an act of direct action because it was a form of sharing information, something the Collective had refused to do. Poignantly, one former Collective member's stepping-down email even

included this as a final comment and not-so-subtle jab at Collective members, "P.S. Anyone is free to share this email with whomever they would like, including volunteers."

These emails were often the first way that volunteers—who were left out of conversations about the organizational structure in the first place—realized that these debates were taking place. Consider the following comments:

> I know it's kind of shitty when people fight, but at the same time it was kind of cool to see it as somebody who's not as familiar with what's been going on in the space. Like all of the explosions are really awful for everyone involved in them, but in some ways they pull back the veil of what's going on behind the scenes to those of us who aren't involved. So, in some sense they're informative if not pleasant. –Mesa, volunteer

> Emails from Janice and Malik were interesting, about wanting to be prefigurative and make sure people have the ability to work on as many projects as they want. –Meghan, volunteer

Some participants continued to deliberate what structural changes *could* be made for the sustainability and accessibility of the community. Around the time I was preparing to return to the UK from my fieldwork, some participants raised the possibility of paying Collective members. The shop's finances had been improving, and although there was not enough income to pay workers proper salaries—and certainly not enough to pay *all* volunteers—there was enough to pay Collective members a modest stipend. Despite several Collective members sharing reservations about receiving community backlash, not a single person I spoke to expressed opposition to the Collective receiving a stipend, even the people who were most ardently in favor of changing the community's organizational structure. The only reservation I heard came from a person who had previously worked on the shop's accounts and said she was concerned they still did not have the income to afford wages; nevertheless, she thought that *if* they did have that kind of money at some point, she would support paying workers, even if that only meant Collective members. By and large,

participants were unanimous that—even if not all workers could be paid—a small stipend for some workers was still more accessible (and closer to the end goal of materially valuing peoples' labor, not being exclusionary based on class) than the current structure.

In other instances, participants deliberately took a step back from backstage politics and instead focused their efforts on running events in the space. During a private conversation, one volunteer, Sanna, who had casually worked in the shop for many years, told me that she deliberately never joined the Collective or became more involved in the behind-the-scenes organization "so that it can stay my safe space. You get too close, it becomes unsafe." Instead, she helped organize some of the shop's self-defense events and mentored younger volunteers who needed employment advice. A Staffer with whom I had become friends told me that they no longer wanted to be involved in these conversations because they were just draining, but they still felt that having a free events space was invaluable; as such, they said they only wanted to engage with Pocketbooks as a space, rather than as a community to be heavily involved with on a personal level.

(3.2) GAZING BEYOND THE BOOKSTORE

As I have argued throughout this thesis, a counterpublic derives much of its politically transformative potential from its capacity to disturb and/or influence *other* publics—to address exclusions that affect people not only within the confines of that space but in society writ large. Although much of this prefigurative discourse at Pocketbooks was oriented internally, the benefits of participating in such a discourse carried weight beyond bookshop walls. In the process of trying to prefigure safety, participants developed skills,

knowledge, and resources to dismantle systems of oppression that exist outside the shop. As such, although Pocketbooks may not have offered a utopian blueprint for safe organization, it nevertheless acted as a kind of training ground for marginalized groups and/or activists, thereby acting as a place with the capacity to enact social change.

For example, many of the events hosted at Pocketbooks were focused on gaining skills or developing tools to resist violence elsewhere. Take, for example, a Copwatch event, where organizers discussed methods for undermining racist policing efforts. The event was a combination of raising awareness of how policing is disproportionately present in lower-class neighborhoods of color, how to listen to police radios and then warn locals of police presence before they show up to arrest them, and activists' legal rights. In another event about cyber security, Pocketbooks volunteers shared how our information might be used against us and how we can better protect ourselves and one another by making some security changes.

By working in a bookshop, many workers gained employable skills that allowed them to both mitigate the extent of their marginalization elsewhere and even creatively impact the spaces around them, as many volunteers shared in the beginning of this chapter. For example, although transgender people often have a harder time finding work, a former Staffer told me that they had been hired by one of the largest bookstore chains in the United States and promoted to manager quite early on. Because of their newfound position of power, they were not only able to gain employment and decent wages but even have some power and control in the shop. They told me that they created a "queer" book section, which would serve to introduce shop comers to books and themes they may never have been exposed to, while also making other queer people feel more seen. They added:

> I do a queer table section…those two tables together [that comprise the queer table section] are basically the top sellers at Pocketbooks…. We try to carry a number of things and not exclude people…. With the queer table everyone has already accepted it doesn't sell as well as other things, so I kind of do whatever I want. –Nadia, former Staffer

Running with her knowledge about running a bookshop, a former Collective member opened a bilingual (Spanish-English) bookstore of her own, with a mission to "celebrate Black, Latinx, and Indigenous heritage," to "create a business with a commitment to accessibility and a mission of empowering those already in the neighborhood," and to serve the local existing Spanish-speaking community in the face of rapid gentrification. The new bookstore shares an ethos and language about accessibility, justice, and fighting urban gentrification with Pocketbooks, but focuses more on resisting racism and celebrating community. The website even includes small photographs of the Collective with their names and pronouns. As the people who forged Pocketbooks have moved on to new ventures, what was just one safe space has now bourgeoned into many.

Furthermore, even though many volunteers decided to leave Pocketbooks due to irreconcilable differences and negative feelings, debates over prefiguration helped people clarify their own positions and values. With a better understanding of what could be improved upon, combined with a nuanced understanding of how alternative organizations run (including the obstacles they may run into), several workers felt newly empowered to create new activist organization and alternative spaces of their own. One former Staffer, who left Pocketbooks due to frustrations with internal hierarchy, began another organization with their partner dedicated to animal welfare and veganism—one that would be intersectionally minded and aware of the racist and classist undertones that underly many other vegan groups. This Staffer said it was the knowledge and confidence they gained at Pocketbooks that allowed them to go into this new project with a heightened understanding of their goal.

As such, even those who felt frustrated with and alienated by the community nevertheless acknowledged the value and skills they were leaving with. They said:

> In terms of using skills I've learned in the place and moving on, I feel, from my experiences, for better or worse, from Pocketbooks, I'm going to start a group that will hopefully be better than what I've already done, than what's already been done. I was re-reading the Mission Statement for the group we're going to do. It probably has faults and things I haven't thought of, but it's so much more the direction I want to be in. And it fills certain needs that Pocketbooks does not. So, I want to do something about all these things…always questioning, always being critical, always changing things based on the situation and peoples' voices. –Sammy, Staffer

The word "hopefully" stands out in Sammy's comment. Despite their dissatisfaction with Pocketbooks, Sammy nevertheless retained hope for a better future, even if they no longer saw that future being actualized in Pocketbooks. For Sammy, Pocketbooks was not the final destination or the only place in which an alternative, more just society could be forged (or thought about, or practiced), but a stop along the way of a never-ending journey. Nevertheless, Sammy's voice was hoarse during our interview; leaving Pocketbooks behind was not an easy undertaking, and they felt hurt by some of the participants they had previously considered friends.

(3.2) ON HOPE: THE JOURNEY AND THE SHIP

The iterative nature of striving for a better future was reiterated to me in a conversation with a woman who overheard one of my interviews about some of the frustrations with the Collective. The woman, sympathetic to what she overheard, encouraged us to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. She was a few decades older than us and had been heavily involved in feminist and lesbian activism in the 70s. Reminiscing, she said that although she was grateful for that feminist community because it helped her

embrace her sexuality, she "had to survive it, because we hurt each other a lot." She added that the key was, "Forgiveness. Forgiveness! I didn't know that I had it in me to be that forgiving." Before returning to my interview, she added, "You have to say something about inspiration," insisting that I could not possibly leave my thesis on a pessimistic note. She told me how it was refreshing to come to the store and see the ideological changes that had happened since her activist years, and that it was amazing to see how far we had come in the past few decades. She acknowledged how much more diverse the shop's literature was, especially regarding the intersection of race and gender.

Hearing her optimism allowed me to take a step back and evaluate the community from another angle. Her comment resonates with the claim that utopias may "not necessarily allow for complete emancipation or even happiness, but are suggestive of the potentiality of the future; they give hope" (Jones, 2013: 3). In this case, it was not the potentiality of the *future* that had given her hope, but the realization that her hard work in the past had materialized into the present, and moreover, was continuing to evolve today. And hearing a story of survival, forgiveness, and continued learning gave *me* hope for the future. If she had survived her activism (and had been able to forgive those who had wronged her), maybe one day, the same would be true for us. And regardless of our own feelings, Pocketbooks as a community space continued to survive, even if those who comprised that community were transient members.

One participant summarized the experience of being in Pocketbooks in a poetic metaphor:

> It's like ship that rebuilds itself at sea, constantly, every day. And everyone takes a turn, everyone comes to the ship, and then everyone leaves eventually. It's this Narnian relationship we have to it, where it's like, you come here, and you change the place, and it changes you. And hopefully you learn at least some of the things you need to learn. And

> there's this kind of term of duty or something like that. You have this term of service, where you're here for some period of time that it makes sense for you to be here, and you help support the space, and then you pass it along to the next generation.

To this woman, *we* were that generation. For us, that next generation was sending in their volunteering applications as we bid our farewells to the shop that we had changed and been changed by, our gazes set to future projects and other shores.

CONCLUSION

At the outset of this chapter, I described the question of how participants grapple with prefiguring safety in their organizational structure as a kind of "backstage" debate. However, framing them as backstage, as behind-the-scenes rather than front-and-center, detracts from their centrality in the process of creating a safer space. In a society in which capitalism reigns supreme, where people are subject to emotional and time constraints, borders are porous, hierarchies of whiteness and gender normativity are internalized, and people may deliberately seek to harm those challenging the status quo, questioning how to prefigure safety is not only an inevitable component of forging a more just society, but one necessary for producing social change. A safer space is not only a place that is produced by and produces a discourse on safety and violence—and transforms people, the spaces they inhabit, and their behaviors in the process—but a place for negotiating *how* to strive for justice within an unjust society. How to prefigure safety (when violence is inescapable) is not a "backstage" debate, but a spotlighted, center stage conversation that has the potential to shape, define, and (re)direct future generations of that space to come, motivate those who leave and attempt to do better in other organizations, forge bonds of friendship and

solidarity, and help people rethink what creating social change looks like on the ground—in its messy, contradictory, inspiring, and imperfect reality.

Despite the temptation to rate the success of a safer space by how "safe" it is, this is a question that serves participants in a safer space more than a researcher seeking to conceptualize one. Not only will a safer space never be totally safe because it is embedded in a violent society (and will inevitably reproduce some of that violence), but in a safer space, safety can never be actualized because it will always be (re)defined, contested, and reconceptualized once more. Indeed, this kind of valuative and iterative process helps explain how and why Pocketbooks has evolved over time, from being a place that contested "violence against women" to a place that focuses on "violence and trauma" that affects all marginalized groups (as reflected in the book section titles, for instance). These changes occurred because community members continuously engaged in conversations about where the space was falling short of redressing structural violence, rethinking what safety looks like, and believing that improvement is always possible. Creating a safer space is an iterative process of defining, re-defining, debating, (un)learning what constitutes both violence and safety and how that imaginary translates into practice.

In a safer space, safety acts a hermeneutic device for participants *of that space*. The safer space, in turn, becomes a "[place] from which to think and about which to think" (Cooper, 2013: 18). Much like Solnit says of the moon, safety is not a fixed destination but a moving target. But even something changeable has the power to move people. That people are willing to board this "ship that rebuilds itself at sea, constantly, every day"—no matter the sea sickness, even if that shore is never reached—suggests that hope for a freer future burns bright, even on the darkest of nights.

INTERLUDE 7

2017:

I've sent Molly a PDF of a poster I'm going to present on my research, and they've sent it back to me and retitled the document "Poster vandalism." They've taken it upon themselves to add their own commentary in red. Where I've written that safe spaces have been gaining media attention, they scratch that out to write "scrutiny," adding a comment that the media should not be presented as a neutral entity. Where I've added that the media criticizes safe spaces for stifling debate, Molly adds "and 'innovation of thought'—liberal normie bullshit." Where I've written that I completed my fieldwork, Molly has written "BOO."

2018: [phone call]

Me: You won't believe who I ran into in Oxford!

Taylor: Who? Someone from Pocketbooks?

Me: Yeah, I ran into Joe on Cornmarket Street. I gave him a weird look at first because I couldn't believe it was him, but apparently he's here on a work trip.

Taylor: Small world. Is he still volunteering at Pocketbooks?

Me: He is, and he told me that so much has changed since we left. Apparently, there was a massive fight about the Palestine section and a whole bunch of people decided to walk out. Someone just removed the section one day because they felt it was wrong, but they weren't even willing to have a discussion about it.

Taylor: How can Pocketbooks call itself radical without a Palestine section?

Me: Well, I don't know, and I'm not sure what will happen next, either.

January 2020: [email from Sandra]

Subject: Pocketbooks catch up/news

> Hey, you up for a chat sometime soon? I don't mean to be all clickbaity with my subject line, but I was just told Pocketbooks is doing away with volunteers soon…

January 2020: [phone call]

Me: They're doing *what*?

Sandra: Yeah, apparently they're moving away from the volunteer model and only want to have a small cooperative.

Me: Hmm. Well maybe that's a good thing?

Sandra: Maybe. I'm kind of skeptical though. It kind of feels like they just don't want to have to deal with volunteer input anymore, but maybe I'm wrong. It does seem like they're less about radical organizing now though. The last time I went to the shop, there were almost no books in the anarchism and socialism sections, but the queer fiction section was massive. It seems like they're going in a new direction.

Me: I hope I make it out there sometime soon to see what it's like now.

March 2020: [phone call]

Me: Did you see that Pocketbooks can't open until the pandemic is under control?

Taylor: I know! Pocketbooks never even closes on the holidays. It's wild.

Me: How are you hanging in there?

Taylor: I'm okay. Actually, a few of us oldies from Pocketbooks were thinking of hosting an online movie hangout, if you'd like to join. We'll all be coming in from different time zones, but it might be fun for us all to hang out again, even virtually.

Me: Sounds fun! Do you all still keep in touch regularly?

Taylor: I'm still in touch with a few of them. It's nice to stay in the know, y'know? But mostly I like having a radical network of friends across the country. It makes things feel more normal in times like these, especially.

July 2020: [email from Molly]

Subject: Some Pocketbooks news

> Hey, we should have a chat or have a call soon, but I wanted you to hear from a friend that Pocketbooks is closing…

Revolution is not a one-time event.

—Audre Lorde, *Sister outsider: essays and speeches*

CONCLUSION | ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE

The curious thing about spending eighteen months in a radically alternative community—or one significantly different from the mainstream society in which I live and have been raised—is that practices, language, and values that may have once seemed "radical" or "abnormal" to me had become the norm. At Pocketbooks, "common sense and taken-for-granted knowledge were reoriented" (Cavalcante, 2019: 1725). Intersectional interpretations of safety, grounded in recognition of everyday experiences of structural violence, had moved from "the periphery to the center and demanded not only recognition but comprehension" (Cavalcante, 2019: 1725).

Much like Lewis Carroll's beloved fictional character, Alice, who falls down a rabbit hole into Wonderland only to be disoriented upon her return to reality, I found that upon my return to Oxford (incidentally, the same place to which Alice returned after her own foray into another world), I felt alienated from the city I had known for several years. During one of my first presentations in Oxford about my fieldwork, after which I explained basic gender pronoun usage at Pocketbooks, the convening professor addressed my audience with a chuckle, "Don't worry, none of you need to tell me your pronouns when you raise your hands—your name suffices." People laughed. A few weeks later, I attended a seminar for feminist researchers in my university, and we were given blank nametags to fill in and wear on our shirts. Without thinking twice, I wrote, "Rachel, she/her." After mingling and glancing at other peoples' nametags, I realized that I was the only one to have included my pronouns (I even noticed a few people doing double takes at my nametag). Looking around

the room, I noticed that I was in a crowded room of feminist researchers, all of us white and presenting in standard feminine dress.

Although Pocketbooks is far from a blueprint of an ideal society, it nevertheless is suggestive of what a more just society might look like. It sometimes takes leaving a place to realize how far that view is from the current situation elsewhere. Despite there being hints of social change in society writ large, the struggle to transform it into an equal one, in which all people are valued, celebrated, and given platforms to speak—and do not need to fear violence in all its forms—is far from over. While the convening professor of my presentation likely meant no harm, his attitude nevertheless exhibits a lack of understanding of everyday violence aimed at LGBTQ and transgender people, and attitudes that may seem inconsequential in a seminar room nevertheless have real-world consequences. A National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health (for people aged 13-24), carried out by the Trevor Project in 2020, found that 48% of LGBTQ youth in the United States had engaged in self-harm in the previous twelve months (a figure that rose to 60% in transgender/nonbinary youth); 40% of LGBTQ respondents considered suicide in the previous twelve months (>50% for transgender/nonbinary youth); and 29% of LGBTQ youth have experienced homelessness (*The Trevor Project National Survey,* 2020). Despite these staggering statistics, 40% of LGBTQ youth reported that they did not receive parental permission to receive care, and around half of transgender/nonbinary respondents did not want to seek care out of concern that the providers would be incompetent (*The Trevor Project National Survey,* 2020). Meanwhile, suicide is one of the leading causes of death amongst young people (aged 15-19) in the U.S (*Adolescent Health,* 2021).

Moreover, race and gender-based violence continues to propagate. Despite widespread protests for Black Lives Matter and an increasing awareness about racialized violence, police brutality remains one of the greatest American injustices. In 2020, 28% of people murdered by police officers were Black, despite comprising only 13% of the population ("Mapping police violence," 2021). Although the police officer who killed Black American George Floyd has been now convicted of murder, 98.3% of killings by police have not resulted in officers being charged with a crime ("Mapping Police Violence," 2021). The #metoo movement continues to grow and women continue to publicly voice their experiences of domestic and/or sexual violence, but the war over women's bodily autonomy[50] and reproductive rights still rages. The U.S. Supreme Court has decided to consider Mississippi's bid to ban abortions after the 15th week of pregnancy (Smith, 2021), and a new law in Texas bans abortions after six weeks even in cases of rape and incest (Tuma, 2021). These statistics and legal propositions are only the tip of the iceberg. Inclusion and representation in mainstream media and pop culture remains limited (as evidenced by the viral hashtag #OscarsSoWhite), and the wage gap continues to increase along lines of gender, race, and other axes of systemic discrimination ("Racial and Gender Pay Gap Statistics for 2021").

Meanwhile, assaults on the services, organizations, and communities that attempt to provide for, platform, and prioritize those living at the margins have intensified. Often these assaults do not look like explicit attacks. Instead, they may unfold as narratives aimed to discredit (and ultimately, defund charitable organizations) or simply appear as "natural"

[50] It is worth acknowledging, however, that even though many of these arguments are framed in terms of women's rights, they can affect people of all genders. It is not only (cisgender) women who can have children, for example (non-binary and trans people can also bear children, too).

consequences of gentrification and urbanization. For example, Planned Parenthood, a nonprofit organization that provides reproductive healthcare and is especially valuable to low-income Americans, has been subject to anti-abortion lobbying with a view to block it from receiving federal funding. Fueled by anti-transgender fearmongering, the so-called "Bathroom Bills" in the U.S. have been introduced with a view to preventing transgender people from using the bathroom that aligns with their gender; bathrooms have become a battleground for basic human rights (and the "right to pee!" as one volunteer had phrased it). Meanwhile, gentrification continues to erode the safe and queer neighborhoods (we might even say, "queer counterpublics") that once afforded LGBTQ communities—especially LGBTQ communities of color—a place to congregate, freely express themselves, and find a place to belong (see: Doan and Higgins, 2011; Goh, 2018; Hanhardt, 2013; Manalansan, 2005). In the U.S., Bloomberg reports that the number of gay bars had decreased from 2,500 in 1976 to fewer than 1,400 in 2019 (Morgan, 2019), fueled, in part, by assimilation and gentrification (Kornhaber, 2020). Only a handful of lesbian bars remain, and the only remaining lesbian bar in Brooklyn has closed indefinitely (Capps, 2021).

These incursions have only accelerated in the wake of the Covid-19 global pandemic that unfolds at the time of writing. With hospitality being one of the hardest-hit industries, queer bars, event spaces, and restaurants—many of which were barely afloat prior to the pandemic—have suffered massive blows. Many of these businesses and spaces have been forced to close not just temporarily but permanently, leaving LGBTQ workers without employment and queer people more generally unable to find community (see: Ligori, 2020; Mattson, 2020). Reflecting on the closure of queer venues in the UK during the pandemic, British Drag Queen, Bimini Bon Boulash, said, "They're safe spaces, and they're needed.

And they're necessary. And they need to be protected at all costs" (Queens on lockdown, 2021). These safe spaces—which she has described as "sacred," especially in uncertain times—are also more vulnerable than ever (Craik, 2021). The same structures of violence and domination that make safe spaces so valuable to marginalized communities are the very same forces that threaten their existence altogether.

Although New York is often portrayed as a universe of its own, a place "where dreams are made of" (thank you, Jay-Z and Alicia Keys), the city is no stranger to the effects of global crises. In spring 2020, the NYC region was deemed the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, forcing many schools, bars, restaurants, event spaces, and businesses to close. Although I knew that Pocketbooks, a small business that barely broke even at the best of times, would struggle financially without a regular influx of customers, I did not anticipate an announcement from the shop only a few months into the pandemic.

On 21 July, 2020, I received a message from a friend who worked at Pocketbooks at the same time as me (incidentally, the same friend who I previously credited for "gossiping" with me). It read, "We should have a chat or have a call soon, but I wanted you to hear from a friend that Pocketbooks is closing." Later that day, I read the following statement on one of Pocketbooks' social media pages:

> We did not expect to ever be writing a statement like this. Due to so many unforeseen circumstances both pandemic-related and otherwise, we must leave our current location…in search of a new, more sustainable, accessible and safer home.
>
> This is not goodbye. This is "wait for our new location announcement," hopefully soon. The facts are: we have outgrown our space and we want features that better accommodate and center our disabled collective and community. We want ramps and bathrooms and ventilation and chair lifts! We are committed to realizing this for our future home!
>
> Though we wish we were making this decision on our own terms, our decision has been forced by the demands of our landlord for more money and by their inaction on necessary

> repairs to the structural damage our wild little slice of space has endured over these last 21 years.
>
> With so much afire, we're evermore committed to doing all we can to keep this project alive and rooted at a physical space (such a rarity in NYC). We know our movements need spaces—to share and grow and learn and build alongside each other.
>
> It's going to be hard, and take a lot of work. But we're here for it. We humbly ask for your patience and continued support in the coming weeks and months as we relocate, store and continue our virtual programming.
>
> With all our hearts and guts,
> The Pocketbooks Collective

Despite the palpable desire to keep Pocketbooks alive, it was hard to push aside feelings of uncertainty and grief reading this post. If Pocketbooks could not afford rent in this location, where else could they find a home? Given the pressure that the pandemic had placed on everyone, could the Collective find the time or energy to keep going, or would they close permanently, like so many other queer and radical spaces? Regardless of what was in store for Pocketbooks' future, the space I had come to know and care for, and had thought about relentlessly for years while writing up my thesis, was coming to an end.

Grief was mirrored in a more personal capacity within the Pocketbooks community, too. The Pocketbooks book buyer and Collective member, Nina—who had worked in the shop for over a decade and was one of the longest-standing workers in the shop—passed away in November 2020 due to health complications and "a failing healthcare system," as the Pocketbooks' statement reads. Her memorial, which took place in Brooklyn, was livestreamed for those of us not present in New York. During the memorial, I found myself looking into the faces of people I had not seen in years, including former volunteers who at one time refused to be in the same room together, let alone share any kind of emotional

space. One former Staffer, who left the shop around the time I returned from fieldwork (a departure that was quite traumatic for her), said that Nina was the only person who could have brought this group of people together again. A few of us even laughed. As she and others expressed feelings of loss, and newer volunteers and Collective members expressed gratitude to people like the book buyer who helped sustain the space for so many years, I felt reminded of the woman who told me that forgiveness was the key to surviving. As we mourned our friend, and in a way, mourned the space that many of us had already left, it felt like we were planting the seeds of forgiveness, too. As one former Staffer said during the memorial, "none of [our disagreements] fucking mattered, because we were showing up for each other." I left Nina's memorial realizing that we still would continue to show up for each other in the future when it mattered, even if we were no longer in regular communication. Our shared experiences had afforded us an enduring intimacy. Leaving, which for many people felt forced, unwanted, and bitter, now felt softer, like a kind of passing of the torch to the next generation who needed the space like many of us once did.

Muñoz (2009) writes of "hope in the face of heartbreak" to describe the resilience that activists embrace as they take on incommensurable politics. For Muñoz, heartbreak often takes shape in disappointment when activists realize misalignment between theory and practice in their organizing. But heartbreak can take many forms. It can also be in the grief of a loved one whose death may have been prevented if only the world were a little fairer, if only healthcare were premised not on capital but on accessibility. Or it can be in the recognition that the place you once loved may not endure increasing rent prices and may be forced to close. Hope in the face of that heartbreak, however, is to recognize that hope and

disappointment are two sides of the same coin. As Muñoz (2009) suggests, if failure, disappointment, and heartbreak can be embraced, then hope can endure.

In June 2020, just prior to closing, Pocketbooks held a joint event with a feminist abolitionist organization. Some of the speakers included prominent activists and authors, such as Janet Mock, Roxane Gay, Yaa Gyasi, and Gabby Rivera. The event was held with the view to split the donations between the two groups, with the Collective hoping to make enough money to sign a continuing lease in the shop's longstanding location. While the event did raise a fair amount of money from the fundraiser, the figures were not enough to sign a new lease in this space. When the Pocketbooks Collective realized they would be unable to stay put, however, they did not abandon hope. Instead, much like when the Collective made the decision not to pay themselves so that the shop could survive in the early 2000s, they explored other options. After all, the community is comprised of survivors, and no one is more resilient than a survivor.

Only a few weeks after announcing the shop's closure, Pocketbooks made an exciting announcement: although they would be leaving behind the current retail space for good, with the money from the fundraiser, they would make a down payment on a new lease only a few blocks away from the shop's original location. Despite the hurdles put in their path (and as Muñoz writes, "Hope's biggest obstacle is failure," [2009: 207]), the Collective never contemplated abandoning the community altogether. Rather poetically, the fundraising event that had incidentally secured their future was called, "Another World is Possible." That hope—that another world is possible—was not extinguished by these challenges but reignited by them.

At the beginning of this thesis, I proposed an anthropology of safety, which was modeled, not unintentionally, on Jansen's (2019) proposal for an anthropology of hope. In my proposal, I committed first to considering the conditions for desiring safety, and second, to exploring the provision of safety. Throughout this dissertation, I have shown that experiences of structural violence and its everyday consequences (i.e., denial of peoples' autonomy and identity, restriction of freedom of movement and self-expression, instances of physical violence, and more) motivate marginalized people to seek safety—something that is a given for those who benefit from these structures of power (and is often less visible to them). The process of procuring this safety—the process of cultivating a safer space—is inherently self-reflexive, valuative, and iterative. It involves intellectual engagement (identifying and naming forms of violence that might be culturally accepted as "normal"); creativity (imagining how safer alternatives can be implemented through architecture, language, social behaviors, spatial ordering, organization, etc.); humility and reflexivity (as demonstrated in participants' willingness to examine the ways in which they reproduce violence and/or how the practices they have implemented still fall short); debate and disagreement (from who deserves a place in a safe space to what safety looks like in an unsafe world); and resilience (to have "hope in the face of heartbreak"). The conceptual practice of creating a safe space is intimated in my thesis title, "Reconceptualizing the 'safe space' metaphor at a feminist safer space in New York City." Although I am partly referring to my own part in rethinking this metaphor, I am also alluding to the fact that iterative reconceptualization is inherent to the safer space project itself and to all who participate.

Finally, I set out to produce anthropological knowledge that enables us to imagine alternatives to the world we know. Pocketbooks—in addition to being a place to think from

and about safety—is also a place that offers alternatives to the neoliberal measures we see being taken in the United States (and many Western states) to procure safety, which emphasize risk control, expulsion, criminalizing behaviors (and consequently, entire groups of people), and individual responsibility. Not only does the Pocketbooks community flip neoliberal categorizations of "risky" and "safe" on their heads (in terms of who and what falls into each category), but they also emphasize learning and transformation over expulsion and criminalization, and collective efforts at procuring safety over staunch individualism.

Although not everyone has an opportunity to engage with Pocketbooks firsthand, it is my hope that this piece of writing can nevertheless provoke the reader to "critique normalized aspects of the world we live in" (Sliwinski, 2016: 439), as well. In future projects, I would like to imagine my writing as a safer space to help provide readers with a more immersive experience and to reduce the amount of violence that gets reproduced within academia (a space that most do not consider to be "violent" in the first place). This "safer" research could take many forms and allow us to think what "safe research" means. It might include some of the following qualities: citing only authors from underrepresented and marginalized groups (or at least giving them more textual space); co-authoring the text with participants—or, writing the piece myself, but publishing it with participant commentary of that writing; allowing participants to decide the most important topics and themes, which chapters could be centered around; or, refusing to publish anything that can only be consumed by a limited (e.g. academic) group. Although decolonial ideas and techniques have been present within the discipline at least since the 1970s and with the publication of *Writing Culture* in the 1980s (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), what is both

disappointing and noteworthy is that these ideas still feel quite radical. Ethics processes can still feel like tick-boxing exercises, too, rather than genuine engagement with ethical considerations, of which mitigating (structural) violence should be part. Nevertheless, it feels like some of the experiments and suggestions made decades ago may finally be gaining traction to a more receptive anthropological public.

Although anthropological knowledge often is reduced to what has been produced in writing, the process by which that knowledge was forged, and how it shaped the researcher in the process, matters, too. I was reminded of the quote that anthropologists regularly tell their students, that their task is to "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar." I had always interpreted this quote as a responsibility to change the mindset of *others*—of a readership, of a public, of people unfamiliar with the culture at the center of an anthropological text. What I realized upon reflection was that my disorientation at my first research presentation was not as simple as reverse culture shock, but how I related to the world around me. On both personal and intellectual levels, *I* had also changed; my internal world had shifted, too. As one volunteer had said, "…you come here and you change the place, and it changes you." My newly found confidence as a young woman with a voice worthy of being heard, and my increased sensitivity to and awareness of forms of structural violence, had traveled with me back across the pond. This is not to congratulate myself or suggest that I have emerged on the other side of this experience totally enlightened and transformed. Why, for example, did I not speak up to the professor who made a joke at transgender and nonbinary peoples' expense? Why did I not speak to the conveners of the feminist research group to suggest that people should include pronouns on their nametags?

Much in the way that a safe space will never reach its destination, unlearning the ways in which we (re)produce violence in our everyday lives is an ongoing process.

A curious thing has happened in the years over which my dissertation writing has spanned: the transformative potential of safe spaces has made itself abundantly apparent, especially in the last few months. Undergraduate students—who are often a decade or more younger than me—are fluent in language surrounding gender, sexuality, race, disability, and sexual violence that I first earned in safe spaces. Many of them are quick to tell me their names and pronouns, often including them in their email signatures. I have even noticed this phenomenon with academic researchers and non-academic staff, too. The other day on the popular social media platform, Instagram, I noticed a new option for users to insert their pronouns next to their names, as well as a new closed captioning feature to make video stories more accessible to viewers who are hard of hearing. "Misgendering" now has a dedicated page on the website of *Healthline*—an esteemed provider of health information—which outlines some discrimination that transgender and genderqueer people face (Clements, 2017). Transphobia now has a dedicated page on *Wikipedia*.

Although caution is merited in instances when businesses start using language developed by activists, in the rise of domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic, several businesses across the UK (including banks, supermarkets, and pharmacies) have partnered with *UK Says No More,* a national campaign to raise awareness of sexual violence and domestic violence, to have their shops act as "safe spaces." During Black Lives Matters protests in 2020, I regularly came across articles on mainstream media platforms arguing in favor of criminal justice reform, including the abolition of police and prisons. Phrases like "defund the police," which I had only ever heard in communities like that at Pocketbooks,

were suddenly part of a national conversation; Minnesota even announced that they would defund its police department (Levin, 2020). A friend from Pocketbooks messaged me during these protests, "What the hell is happening? All of this shit we've been saying for years has suddenly gone mainstream."

Having left Pocketbooks some years ago, and not being heavily involved in like-spaces since my fieldwork, I find myself wondering where these conversations will go next and what discourse is emerging in these spaces now. For example, I have noticed that Pocketbooks' new Mission Statement includes being a "warming/cooling place" and emphasizes "mutual aid," which are new to the space; moreover, the statement acknowledges that the shop acts as a "sanctuary for NYC's overlapping queer communities," somewhat narrowing the scope of for whom the shop is intended. Pocketbooks has now embraced a workers' cooperative model, and they state on their website that they "believe the greatest stopgap while we're still surviving under late-stage capitalism is to bolster cooperative working formations, in which the workers make the decisions about all conditions and intentions of the business." There is even a section on the shop's website dedicated to explaining their cooperative model, what it means, and which organizations they are taking lead from. The Safer Space Policy remains unchanged, but there is now a "Harm Reduction, Mutual Aid, & Resource Directory" on the website, which explains the difference between harm reduction and harm elimination (the latter being more akin to neoliberal approaches to safety) and defines mutual aid as "communities taking care of one another." As an example, they say how the community is now organizing hygiene kits and meal-kit drives, with the view to having a free pantry. Additionally, there's a new place on the website with accessibility information, which gives the measurements of the

entrance, bathrooms, counters, and more. There is a Covid-19 policy which says, "We're doing our part to keep ourselves and our community members safe… we want you to browse safely."

Given that total safety has yet to be realized (if it can ever be), there is considerable room for further research to follow the progression of the safe space discourse, to imagine *other* alternatives, and to produce anthropological knowledge that continues to nurture these imaginations. How has Pocketbooks' move towards mutual aid and cooperative organization shifted the conversation about safety—especially for whom and how it should be procured? Have these changes helped address tensions over various exclusions that participants identified (especially pertaining to race, class, and organizational hierarchy)? What does new language like "cooling/warming" mean, and how is it used? How has a global pandemic impacted the significance of what it means for Pocketbooks to be a safer space, and what do people expect of one another during this time? How does this notion of "harm reduction," which now features prominently on Pocketbooks' website, fit into the safe space metaphor?

Because cultivating a place like Pocketbooks depends on self-reflexivity, we may even wonder if "safety" will continue to act as the value through which prefiguration is imagined and negotiated. After all, the metaphor has shifted from "safe" space to "safer" space, so who is to say that that the metaphor will not one day be redefined altogether? Some scholars have even advocated for a new metaphor, like "brave space" (Arao and Clemens, 2013), "resilient space" (Gill, 2017), or even "community of disagreement" (Iversen, 2018). Although Pocketbooks is not the only place through which questions can be explored, how the community pivots to address new threats, redress their own shortcomings,

and adapt to being in a new space, are questions worth following. We may also wonder how other communities, which may not have survived the pandemic, take on new forms.

Much like the greater world in which it is embedded, Pocketbooks seems to have reached a major junction, not dissimilar to the one it found itself in around 2003, when it pivoted towards intersectionality and away from second-wave feminism. Although I have no crystal ball with which to fortune tell (incidentally, however, Pocketbooks now carries tarot cards and more books pertaining to the occult—something else worth exploring), in Pocketbooks, we have something akin to a looking-glass—one that peers not into another world that may one day exist, but something much more extraordinary: a place that exists in the here and now, and the people who believe in possibilities.

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